

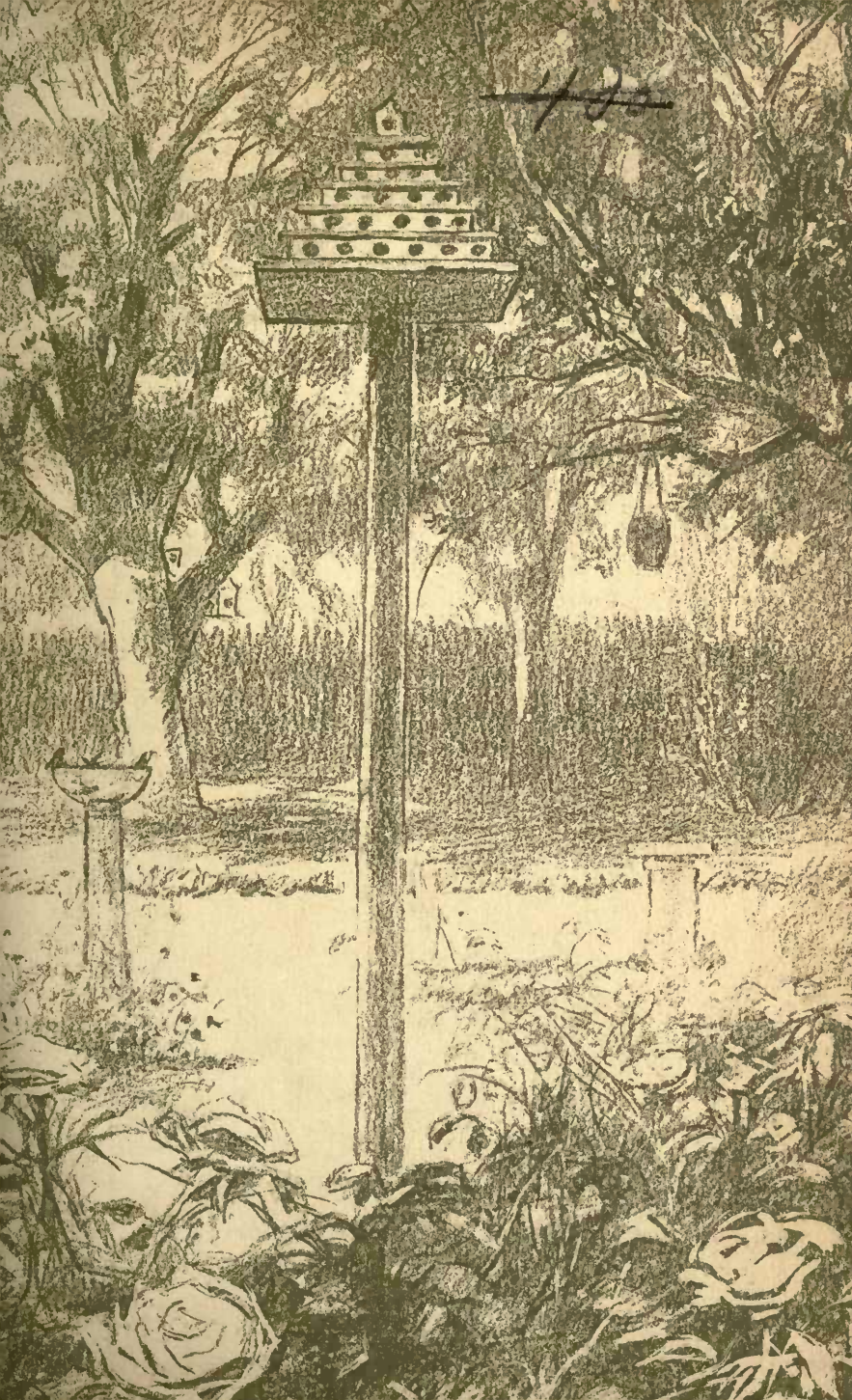


The BIRD HOUSE MAN

by

WALTER
PRICHARD
EATON





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THE BIRD HOUSE MAN

Books by the Same Author

THE IDYL OF TWIN FIRES

THE AMERICAN STAGE OF TO-DAY

AT THE NEW THEATRE AND OTHERS

BARN DOORS AND BYWAYS

BOY SCOUTS OF BERKSHIRE

BOY SCOUTS IN THE DISMAL SWAMP

BOY SCOUTS IN THE WHITE MOUNTAINS

BOY SCOUTS OF THE WILD CAT PATROL

THE RUNAWAY PLACE (*With Elise Underhill*)

THE MAN WHO FOUND CHRISTMAS



“The Bird House Man looked into the blue eyes raised to his and blinked behind his glasses, ‘None of your nonsense!’ he cried, ‘With whom did you go to that dance?’”

THE BIRD HOUSE MAN

BY
WALTER PRICHARD EATON



ILLUSTRATED
BY
THOMAS FOGARTY

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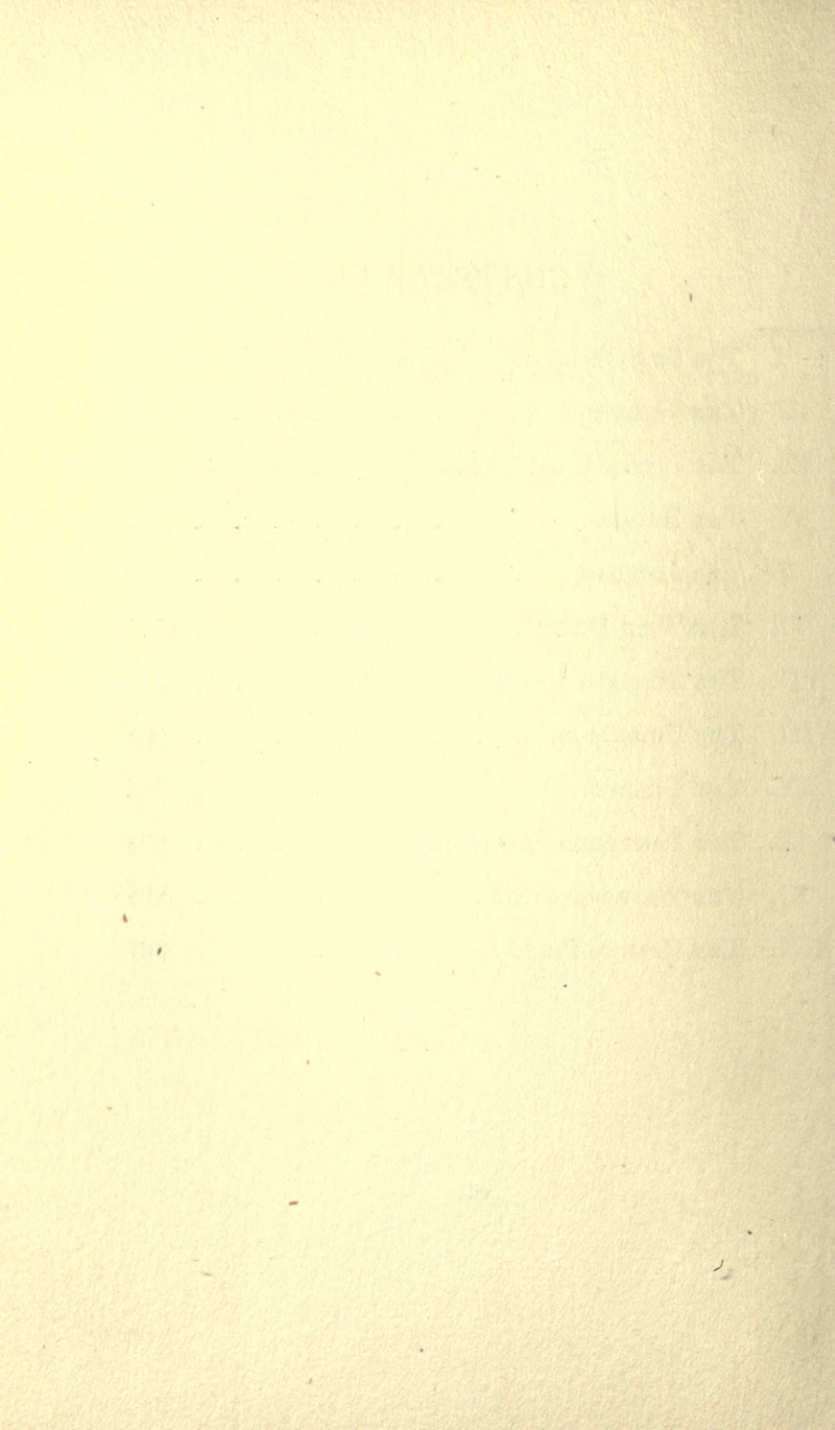
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To
MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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THE BIRD HOUSE MAN

CHAPTER I

THE SONG SPARROW

THE garden of the Bird House Man was the oddest garden in Southmead. Some visitors declared they had never seen its like anywhere. It lay behind a little rambling white house on the edge of the village, and was quite invisible from the road, because the lot was narrow and that part of the frontage not occupied by the house was nearly filled by the shop, a pleasant little building also painted white with bright green shutters. In front of this shop, on weathered poles, were samples of bird houses, and on the foremost pole, beneath a little martin house, swung out a wooden sign which creaked in the wind, and bore in gilt letters this legend:

FARNUM'S FAMOUS BIRD HOUSES

But when you passed between the shop and the house you found that the lot ran back several acres, bounded on either side by a thick hemlock hedge twenty feet high which completely shut it off from the world. At first the garden was a riot of little

flower beds separated by sanded paths, with two big maples on either side, and in the centre two elaborate bird baths which flanked a sundial, baths made of white cement and marble dust in the shape of large toadstools inverted on their stems. A number of weathered gray bird boxes and feeding tables were nailed to the trees or stood on poles amid the beds, one or two swinging from the trees like lanterns; one, on a very tall pole, was a perfect reproduction, even to the shutters, of Alec Farnum's dwelling. If you followed the central path of this garden and passed the sundial, across a bit of green lawn and through a neat vegetable area, you came to a downward slope leading to a little pond surrounded by great masses of iris, riotous in June; beyond the pond stood a little grove of tamaracks, and then a quarter-acre of shrubby cinquefoil. This cinquefoil thicket was surrounded by a high wire fence, with a barbed line all along the top of it, and half hidden in the tamaracks was what appeared to be a chicken house, painted green. It was reached by a rustic bridge over the dam at the left side of the garden, for the pond had been artificially enlarged.

The real charm of this garden end, however, came from the occupants. On the grassy slope between you and the irised rim of the pond, a slope where two or three gnarled old apple trees sprawled in Japanese

picturesqueness, a cock pheasant was usually walking with his wives behind him, the sun shining on his iridescent neck feathers, his long tail sweeping like the rudder of an aeroplane. Sometimes a pheasant or two would be perched in the apple trees, unseen, and astonish you by fluttering down at your feet. Beyond the slope, on the surface of the pond, ducks were swimming, not the heavy domestic sort, but beautiful wild mallards. You became conscious, too, in the June sunlight, in this quiet garden, of a wealth of bird song not to be explained by your close proximity to the wooded hills which pressed close in about Southmead. Song sparrows were singing all about you—one swayed in the top of a hemlock in the hedge, sharp against the sky, so that you could see his little throat flutter. An oriole flashed in the apple tree, swallowed a caterpillar, and poured out a blessing on the feast. The robins were busy. A catbird mewed in the tamarack thicket. There was even the indescribable sweet call of a wood thrush.

But on the June morning which particularly concerns us there was another song besides. It came from the throat of a girl who was standing amid the iris clumps at the edge of the pool, watching the ducks. She stopped singing long enough to call, "Good morning, Bert," at the figure of a man mov-

ing about in the pen of the bird house across the pond, and then she began again, turning slowly and passing up the slope toward the house. A cock pheasant stepped out of the path just far enough to avoid contact, and watched her go by. She paused in her song once more and said, "Good morning, Sir Rupert."

When she reached the flower garden, two chipping sparrows and a robin were contending for the possession of one of the bird baths; the other, twenty feet away, was unoccupied. She had to stop singing a third time to point out to them that their strife was quite childish and unnecessary; then she moved along a side path bordered with foxglove, and selected a stem of white bells flecked with pink, which she picked and pinned across her breast.

"He won't mind," she said, half aloud.

After that she walked to the back door of the little white shop, and entered.

The owner of the garden and the maker of Farnum's Famous Bird Houses looked up from his workbench in feigned surprise.

"Oh, it's only you, is it?" he said, with an air of great disappointment. "I thought a nightingale had somehow strayed into my garden."

"You don't seem very glad that it's me," said the girl.

"Well, why should I be?" said the Bird House Man, laying down the saw he held in his hand. "In the first place, you say 'It's me'; and, in the second place, last night was your night to come to the Bird House and sing; and you go traipsing off to a dance instead with some young fellow not half so interesting nor so handsome as I am."

The girl laughed.

"And you've been stealing one of my foxgloves, into the bargain," he added.

"But doesn't it look pretty where it is?" she asked.

The man surveyed her gravely as she stood in the open doorway with the June sunlight behind her. She was slender and rather tall than short, with blue eyes and delicate features, with a mouth that smiled, but could, you felt, be very wistful. For all her plain white dress, you would have turned a second time to gaze upon her when she passed, for she was virginal and lovely, and her little bare throat curved to her hidden shoulders adorably. Now she was smiling and awaiting the man's reply.

He didn't answer at once, but seemed to be pondering the question. He was a big man, not at all the gentle, mild old fellow you might have inferred from his garden and his occupation. His hair was gray and there was gray in his small, pointed beard; but he was hard and brown, with eyes bright behind

his gold spectacles, and he carried himself like a man of forty. He wore his trousers with a belt, like a youngster, and had the air, indeed, less of a workman than a well-preserved professor pottering with a hobby.

"Well!" she said finally, assuming a pout, "*doesn't* it look nice?"

"With whom did you go to that dance?" he demanded.

"I won't tell you when you ask me that way. Besides, it's none of your business," she laughed.

"Ho, isn't it! You think you can play the tyrant over me, do you? Well, maybe you can, up to a certain point. But there is always a limit. You've made me go to church, I admit, but you shan't dictate how I shall ask questions!"

"I made you go to church?"

"Yes, you! Do you think I'd ever set foot in that stuffy mausoleum of dead creeds and hear that young, soft-faced rector admire his own platitudes, when I might be out watching a mother partridge play broken wing, if you didn't sing in the choir?"

The girl came close to him, raising her face to his. "Who was the good fairy that had me taught to sing?" she asked. "It's *his* fault."

The man looked into the blue eyes raised to his and blinked behind his glasses. "None of your

nonsense!" he cried. "With whom did you go to that dance?"

Then they smiled at one another, and the girl answered quite simply: "With Tom Cook."

"H'm!" said the creator of Farnum's Famous Bird Houses. "Tom Cook! Why'd you go with him? All right, I know—because he asked you."

"I suppose that was the reason," she smiled. "Why, don't you like Tom?"

"Who said I didn't like Tom?"

"You did—all over."

"Did I, now? Well, you tell me first why you *do* like Tom?"

"Who said I liked Tom?"

"Do girls go to dances with boys they don't like?"

"Of course they do, you silly old thing, when they would have to stay at home otherwise."

"Would you have had to stay at home otherwise?" he demanded, with a fine air of incredulity.

"Other people don't think me as nice as you do," the girl answered, looking at him fondly. "I—I guess I'm rather quiet."

"Hello!" cried Alec Farnum, pushing his half-finished bird house to the back of the bench. "Come out and see what I've got in the garden."

She looked surprised at this abrupt transition, but followed him as he led her to an old cigar box

tacked under the low eave of the woodshed, with a round hole the size of a quarter cut in the side. A wren flew out as they approached and inside she saw the nest and the little eggs.

"Ungrateful female!" the man exclaimed. "Here I put up my fine apartments, and lower the rent ridiculously—and nothing doing. Along comes that eight-year-old whipper-snapper, Georgie French, takes an old cigar box, and gets a tenant right away! Fool bird! It's like riding in a day-coach smoker when you might have a Pullman. They were only five-cent cigars in that box, too."

"But think how pleased Georgie will be," said the girl.

The man turned his face away, and his eyes twinkled with pleasure as if the answer delighted him. But he said, "H'm, he's forgotten all about his box by now, the young pup. Come, let's sit by the sundial. Hear that song sparrow! He sings like you, Ruth. That's what you are—a song sparrow. All people are like some sort of a bird, all *nice* people."

Ruth sat beside him on a garden bench and seemed waiting for him to continue. He listened to the bird song for a long moment in silence and then he said, in a grave, quiet voice: "My little girl is growing up! I call you my little girl still, Ruth, because

you have no daddy and I have no daughter. You don't mind?"

For answer Ruth slipped her hand into his.

"That's it!" he said, patting her fingers. "Now you are really a little girl. I was never a little girl myself, and I don't pretend to know much about 'em, which proves I'm the wisest man in the world. But isn't it true that little girls dream about brave knights who will some day come riding by, brave and good knights, who'll sing serenades and quote poetry and make you feel like a song by Schubert or Schumann?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose girls do dream such things sometimes," she answered, "and then they wake up. I suppose every girl dreams of a man who—who—well, who's Sir Launcelot for her. But why do you ask? Surely you don't think that I—Tom Cook——!"

"Dear me, no! Tom Cook singing a serenade? Perish the thought! But my little girl is growing up, just the same, and she will be dreaming like all the rest. No, I don't ask if she has. I never peep into secret gardens. But I do want to know why you say, 'and then they wake up.' That sounds cynical. It interests me."

"Girls in Southmead, maybe I should have said," she answered. "Knights don't come riding

by for Southmead girls, you must know that, Uncle Alec."

"I know nothing of the kind. Why not for Southmead girls?"

"You know why," she said. "Oh, *you* might have come to somebody with romance blazoned in gold on your purple banner, you selfish old thing! But now our boys—well, if they are smart they go to Boston or New York. If they stay here, it means they have no romance in their souls."

"My dear child," said the man gravely, "you don't need to be a successful New York stock broker to have romance in your soul!"

"Of course not," she said. "But—oh, dear, how shall I put it? I can't talk the way you can—you've got to have a heart that feels beauty in things, and a mind that, that *strikes sparks*."

"Ruth, you abominable child, you *are* growing up!" said the man. "Shall I take you to Boston with me on my lecture trip? No, you'd distract attention from the lecture. You come to see me when I get back. I'm going to bring you some new songs. Go home now and tell your mother to put you in pinafores to retard your growth. Go out through the house, will you, and gather up the pile of manuscript on my desk before it blows all over the place. It's another chapter of the new "Bird

Book." You can be typing it while I'm gone. Ungrateful chit, you! Growing up! A cynic! No romance in Southmead! And you a song sparrow!"

"Aren't you funny to-day?" said she, as she got up to go. "Don't stay away too long."

"Only long enough to find somebody who doesn't believe romance is dead," he sniffed. "I have to go to town to renew my faith, you see."

He went back to his shop when she had departed and finished the bluebird box he was at work upon, then he crossed the drive into his house. Mrs. Plumb, his housekeeper, was already setting the table.

"You ain't got none too much time to pack," she said, in her sharp tones. "You know you said I was to remind you to take the train for Boston this afternoon, 'cause you'd got to lecture to the Milton Bird Club to-morrow. You'd better get a shirt or two in Boston, too. That heathen Chinese where you insist on taking your laundry ain't content ter spit tobacco juice on the bosoms—now he's made saw teeth of the cuffs."

"No shirt will live forever, Mrs. Plumb," said Alec Farnum philosophically.

"Well, there's no great need of killin' 'em off in childhood, ez I can see," she retorted.

The man sat down to his luncheon, which Mrs.

Plumb served him. As he ate, he talked, raising his voice to reach her when she went into the kitchen.

"Did you ever reflect," he said, "that the birds never make a mistake in mating? Robins mate with robins, hermits with hermits. Who ever heard of a song sparrow mated with a grackle? It's only we poor blundering humans who get all mixed up in our mating."

"Yes, there's that Sally Fisher, she's married a Jew!" said Mrs. Plumb. "Can't no happiness come of marryin' a Jew, *I* say."

"I'd go farther than that," smiled the man. "It isn't so much Jew or Chinese or Slav that makes the difference in us humans; it's our souls. Some of us are wild ducks, and some of us are hermits, and some of us are domestic robins, or merry chickadees, or cantankerous crows. There are nightingales and song sparrows, as well as hawks and grackles. But we don't find our own kind at mating time. Do you know why we don't, Mrs. Plumb?"

"No. Will you have some more peas?" said she.

"I will, they are delicious," he answered. "The first early peas are always delicious. The answer to my question is that the circulation among souls is not free enough. It is too constricted. Love, Mrs. Plumb, is with us a matter of proximity. We have to love, it's our nature. If we are a song

sparrow, and there is no other song sparrow in sight, we foolishly fall in love with the grackle next door. That's the whole trouble with humanity!"

"Lord, if it only was!" said Mrs. Plumb. "Now, you hurry and pack your bag, and don't forget your pajamas this time. You've had to buy six more pairs than you need in the past four months."

"Very well," said he, lighting his cigar and rising from the table, "and don't you forget to keep the bird baths filled."

"I ain't the forgettin' kind," she retorted.

The man departed presently, with the end of a necktie sticking out from under the cover of his suitcase and a small leather case of lantern slides carried tenderly in his right hand. Five days later he returned in the evening accompanied by a young man who was laden down with a painter's field kit in addition to his other luggage. He had a boyish face, which nobody would have called handsome but anybody would have called honest and pleasant, and when he spoke his voice was music—a rare thing. His "Good evening" quite took the wind out of Mrs. Plumb's sails as she started to bear down upon poor Alec Farnum in anger at his bringing home an unexpected guest, and after supper she left the kitchen door open to hear the sounds which this guest was evoking from the piano, while Mr. Alec

sat huddled contentedly in his big chair, puffing at his pipe. Once she peeped through the door, and was amazed to see that the young man had no lights on the piano at all—he seemed to be making up what he played out of his own head, as she put it to herself.

“Now, Rob,” said his host the next morning, “you can roam where you like after to-day. But this morning, first of all, you’ve got to make me a sketch of my duck pond while the Japanese irises are out. You come with me.”

He led the painter down through the garden, across the dam, and into the tamaracks at the farther side. There he found a spot where an opening made a little vista of the pond with the green slope rising beyond, and in this spot he made the young man set up his easel.

“This is exactly the view I want,” said he, “only there should be a human figure over there in the irises, to show how tall they are. You’d like a model, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t think it’s necessary,” laughed Rob. “I ought to be able to scale the irises by the apple trees beyond, or even by the ducks.”

“No, I want a human in the sketch,” his host declared. “You be sketching in the scene, and I’ll go find a model.”

"Get a little girl in a white dress if you can," the other said.

"A good idea!" cried Alec Farnum with a smile.

He crossed the dam, looked back, and saw that the painter was almost concealed to casual observation from this side, smiled again, and went up to the house and telephoned to Ruth.

"Hello, I'm back!" he said. "Mrs. Plumb is happy because I didn't have to add to my collection of pajamas. But I've something new to show you; something quite wonderful. Please come right over, and, by the way, wear a white dress. . . . What? . . . Oh, why? Because I like to see you in white. . . . Not at all, I *always* notice."

Five minutes later Ruth, flushed with running, came into the workshop and found him with coat off busily sawing.

"Now, what is the surprise?" she cried. "Show it to me, quick!"

"Oh, no! You've got to find it for yourself," said he. "You go down to the pond and stand on our wishing stone amid the iris, and look hard. Then if you are not surprised, I'll be!"

"You funny old fairy, what are you up to now?" she asked, looking at him with eyes full of affection and curiosity, and an odd doubt she could not have explained. "I hope it isn't another wife for Sir

Rupert," she added, "because he's got quite too many as it is."

"Go and see!" he commanded.

She went skipping down the slope, her eyes searching the lawn and the surface of the pond to see if any new pheasants or ducks were in sight, pushed her way through the tall iris stalks, and reached a flat stone on the margin of the pool, with yellow and purple iris blossoms on either side of her. There she stood poised, gazing at the stone, at the water, at the flowers—and saw nothing unusual. She was about to turn and look behind her when a peremptory voice came over the water: "Don't move! That's fine. Hold that pose, please!"

Ruth was too astonished to do anything for a second but hold the pose. Then she slowly raised her eyes toward the other side of the little pond and searched out the spot where the artist was seated, only his head and shoulders and the top of his canvas visible over the undergrowth. She could see only enough to distinguish that he was young. As he looked at her fixedly and turned quickly to dab at his canvas, she flushed a hot red all over and felt an irresistible impulse to turn and flee. She did, in fact, turn, but again his voice called to her:

"Oh, please! Just as you were, I won't keep you there long. I told Mr. Farnum to send a little girl,

but this is much better, a little girl would have been no taller than those purple irises."

So this was the surprise! Ruth was angry. Uncle Alec had no right to submit her to this without warning her—making her an artist's model for a total stranger. She hadn't even put on a good dress, only her old white muslin. And her hair was every which way. She wouldn't stay! Then a new thought struck her, and she turned rosy red again. She suddenly recalled their conversation before he went away, about Tom Cook and romance and knights who came riding by. So Uncle Alec had brought him here for—for *that*! Oh, how *could* men be so clumsy! Of course, he was an old dear—but *that*! What would this artist think if he ever guessed? And of course he would guess, Uncle Alec was so transparent. She would never come near the garden till the stranger had gone away. She was too kind-hearted to spoil the picture now, but she would run the minute it was over. She was angry, mortified, and a little frightened. But she stood quite still till the artist again sang out, "There! I've sketched you in. Don't you want to see the result?"

"Thank you, I—I——" Ruth began.

"Oh, excuse me, it is a tangle getting in here. Wait, I'll bring it."

He arose, picked up his canvas, and came quickly across the bridge toward her. Ruth had stepped back to the grassy slope, and awaited him with a flushed face and beating heart. His voice was pleasant, she had to admit. His face, too, as he drew near, was pleasant. He was a nice man—but of course Uncle Alec would have invited only a nice man, and that made it worse. She sunk her head, embarrassed, as he came up, and looked but sideways at the sketch he held, which smelled pungently of the fresh oils. It didn't seem to her much more than daubs of colour. She could hardly find what was meant for her figure at first.

"You're not very used to looking at pictures in the making, are you?" he laughed frankly. "Or *are* you, and do you really know what a bad painter I am?"

"Oh, it isn't that! I'm *not* used, at all——" she stammered, more than ever embarrassed.

He laughed gayly. "Well, then I'm safe. But I could be a real painter, with you as a model—not across an iris pond in this hard light, but sitting at the window of an old-fashioned house, say—Benson stuff, you know. My, you were made to paint!"

There was no missing the genuine admiration of his tone, and Ruth could feel his eyes on her face. She felt herself growing hot again, but she had to lift her eyes a second to his, and then she dropped

them again in an excess of surprise, of embarrassment, of strange, subtle pleasure.

"Will you let me?" he demanded.

"I—I—I don't know," she said.

Again he laughed. "It's just like that old duck up there to send you down here without coming himself to introduce us, isn't it? He just thinks of everybody as children. My name is Robert Eliot—one *l* and one *t*—and I'm a poor devil of an artist rescued from a big city by our mutual friend. He was kind enough to say he wanted company; and he knew, I guess, that I wanted free board!"

The young man again laughed easily as he made this frank revelation. Ruth had heard of struggling artists. Only the other day she had been reading some sketches of Latin Quarter life. In her secret heart she admired them tremendously, for they had the courage to do what she could never do. She sang; Uncle Alec had given her lessons for three years, every summer, with a fine teacher who spent the hot months in Southmead. But it was only in her secret dreams that she could fancy herself leaving her home, her mother, and buffeting the big world for a place in the musical spotlight. Yet there was the spark of sympathy and understanding in her. She again looked into Eliot's face.

"I'm Ruth Barnes," she said. "I call Mr. Farnum

Uncle Alec, because he has always been my best friend. My father died when I was a little girl. He is always doing kind things for people. Now, I—I must go.”

“Not till you promise to sit for me, really,” he cried.

“Why do you want me to?” she asked, her voice very low. She could not resist the question.

“Why? Bless my heart, can it be there haven’t been any painters in these parts? Because of your hair and your features and your colour and your neck—not madonna-like, that’s not the word, but the essence, physical and spiritual, of maidenhood. Only you must sit in an old room, with maybe pink in your dress, and Uncle Alec’s (I’m going to call him that, too) stuffed bluebird in the northwest corner of the canvas, on his white mantel!”

How easily the enthusiasm sprang into this man’s voice! It seemed to Ruth he created the picture as he talked, the picture of her. And where were her fine resolutions?

“I—I can’t promise!” she suddenly exclaimed, and almost ran up the slope, leaving Eliot astonished.

In the flower garden the Bird House Man was waiting for her, his eyes twinkling. He was evidently unprepared for what she said. She paused in front of him, her face still flushed, and demanded:

"Why did you do it, Uncle Alec? It was horrid of you, really it was. Now I can't come to see you any more!"

"What do you mean, you ungrateful young baggage?" he said. "Can't come to see me any more? Hasn't that rascal made a good picture of you?"

"Oh, I don't know whether it was good or not. What does that matter? What will he think when he knows?"

"Knows *what*?"

"What you've done."

"I've given him the first chance he has had in three years for a vacation and time to paint, instead of making hack book covers and title pages in a publisher's office, if that's what you mean—and sent him what I thought, what I *thought*, was a good model. He's got no kick coming, I guess."

"Oh, Uncle Alec, you are incorrigible!" she cried, close to real tears. "I'm going, and I won't come back while he's here."

"Is that so?" said the man, paying no attention to her gathering tears. "He plays the piano beautifully, and we've brought a lot of new songs, and I had thought of having you and your mother and one or two more in to-night. Of course, if——"

"Oh, you are just *mean*!" she cried, the tears coming at last. And she left him abruptly.

"I'm going to paint a real picture of that girl you sent down," said Eliot at luncheon. "We had to introduce ourselves, by the way. Did you think we were children?"

"Introductions are unromantic," the elder man chuckled. "Why do you pick her out to paint?"

"She is so beautifully featured, the nose and chin and lovely girlish throat. The public likes pretty-girl pictures, and I can make one with her, and yet make it the real thing besides. She's an ideal type of Maidenhood, and of the old New England into the bargain."

"Yes, she's old New England," the other answered. "That's about all we are up here. Never thought of her as so astonishingly pretty, though. She's a quiet little thing, good to her mother, sings well, with maybe a spark of temperament lurking down deep somewhere. Most old New Englanders have one, but they need the very devil of a pair of bellows to blow it to life."

"You've known her too long as a little girl," said Eliot; "I'm sure you don't do her justice."

The Bird House Man turned away his face to smile. "Maybe not, maybe not," he said. "Well, you paint her picture if you can. It will keep both of you out of mischief—perhaps."

That night there was a little party in the Bird

House, as Alec Farnum's dwelling was generally called, and Mrs. Barnes arrived with her daughter, who had been casually informed by the other guests that afternoon that they were coming to hear her sing. After that she couldn't refuse without acknowledging a break with the Bird House Man, but she glared at him when she entered—and he laughed.

There were only two other guests: a nice old gentleman, the president of the village bank and Alec Farnum's life-long friend, and Thomas Trask, a young doctor who had recently come to Southmead and whom Alec Farnum said he liked "because he knows that Horace Greeley doesn't edit the *Tribune* any more."

Eliot sat at the piano, evidently delighted that his new model could sing, and Ruth soon forgot to be angry in the pleasure of an accompaniment that was true, resourceful, and alive with feeling. She lost her first embarrassment at performing before this stranger, too, and sang better than she knew how. They still kept on when the rest had gone out on the veranda over the garden, trying a group of songs Eliot produced. Their heads were close together as they read the unfamiliar notes. Phrases had to be retried. A lovely melody had to be repeated. Sometimes Eliot would linger on a chord, or play it over three or four times, looking up at her

for confirmation of his delight. Then she would smile back, strangely thrilled. Musical study had never been like this before!

Suddenly she noticed that the others were not in the room, and flushed. How long had they been gone? It was Uncle Alec's doing, of course. She stopped singing abruptly.

"What's the matter?" Eliot asked.

"The rest—we've driven them out," she said, a little nervously.

"So we have," laughed the man. "Well, it's no fun for other folks, listening to songs being tried out. The dear public wants only the finished product. But what fun it is for us artists! Though I'm only a clumsy amateur at music, to be sure."

"Us artists!" The words warmed her strangely. "You are the best accompanist I ever had," she replied instinctively.

"I tell you what—we'll try songs every day, after the sitting for the picture, eh?" he cried, with his boyish enthusiasm. "Uncle Alec won't mind."

"No, I suppose he won't," she said, with a quaint smile in spite of herself. Then she quickly led the way to the veranda.

"Not a bad little voice, is it?" the host said half an hour later to his young guest, who was puffing a bedtime pipe.

"She forces the upper register a little, and her attacks are a bit uncertain," Eliot replied; "but, gee whiz, how she *wants* to sing! There's so much music she doesn't know, never heard of. Why, it will be like taking a painter to Italy for the first time to lead her into Gluck and Purcell and Debussy!"

"H'm," said the Bird House Man, "I'm sleepy. The enthusiasm of you youngsters is a bit wearying to us old chaps. Come on to bed with you."

Two days later Eliot demanded to know where Ruth lived, and set off to find her. She blushed as she greeted him at the door of the little white house where she dwelt with her mother, and ushered him rather ceremoniously into a typical New England "parlour," which was dim and stiff, immaculate in its unloveliness and ungracious with Puritanical hair cloth. Only the corner where the piano stood looked as if it were in familiar use.

"I came about that picture," he began at once. "I'm all ready, got the canvas all laid, and the lights gauged. I'll have to paint on it from about two-thirty till four or five to have the light right. It's too hard in the morning."

"Couldn't you paint it here?" asked Ruth. She did want to have it painted, she did so yearn in secret for another session of song trials—yet she had her defences up, and her pride was challenged.

The man shook his head, with difficulty refraining from letting his eyes sweep the room. "How can I explain?" he said. "It's not alone you, but the particular light from the olive-brown walls in the Bird House, and just the corner of the smoky white mantel, and Uncle Alec's stuffed blue jay and that framed Audubon plate that hangs near the window. The scheme is ideal, and it couldn't be reproduced anywhere else."

"Couldn't you bring the blue jay here?"

"But hardly the wall paper."

"Some of that is coming down already," Ruth smiled. "Mrs. Plumb has tried three times to glue it, because Uncle Alec won't have the village paper-hanger in the house; he says he knows he snares partridges."

Mrs. Barnes came into the room just then, and Eliot turned to her with his plea.

"Why not go, Ruth?" she asked. "If it isn't all right to go to the Bird House, I don't know where you *can* go. You live there half the time as it is!"

Ruth flushed. She had not been thinking of the proprieties. Nobody but Uncle Alec could know what she had been fighting for, and he would only dimly understand. He was a man, after all. And now her mother had made it necessary that she

should either surrender or withdraw; either go or refuse point-blank.

"Oh, very well," she said briefly. "What kind of a dress shall I wear?"

"Show me all you have!" cried Eliot enthusiastically.

Her mother helped her bring down several dresses, and he made her hold each one to her chin in the light of the window. "That's it!" he said, at a white muslin with tiny pink roses on it. "Wear that, and come this afternoon—the light is fine today. Good-bye, I shall gobble my lunch!"

Mrs. Barnes seemed really more excited than her daughter after the artist's departure. Indeed, Ruth went with slow, reluctant feet toward the Bird House that afternoon. She felt oddly shy, and a bit frightened, as if she had made a surrender of something personal and precious, she knew not quite what. She was no longer angry at Uncle Alec. She didn't doubt that Robert Eliot truly wanted to paint her picture, and that he was too honest even to surmise that a scheme had been put upon him. And that made matters worse, because now she was a partner to the scheme. Therefore she couldn't be angry at Uncle Alec, which made her angry at herself. Besides, she wanted to go—oh, she wanted to go!

And she went. Uncle Alec was in the dining-room when she entered. He had been correcting proofs. There was also a fresh batch of manuscript by the typewriter for her to copy. "More work for you," he said. "But now for the picture. I'm getting quite excited about this myself."

He was puffing at his pipe while Eliot posed her, reset the blue jay a dozen times, spaced the Audubon plate better to suit him on the wall, adjusted and readjusted the shades, and finally, when everything suited him, marked the spot for each object, even Ruth's feet, with chalk, and fell eagerly to work, first throwing his coat into a corner and rolling up his sleeves.

"You're not very polite to the lady," said the older man.

"Oh, bother!" cried Eliot. "We are working. Miss Barnes is an artist, too; she understands. You only write books, what do you know about art?"

"Nothing," said Alec Farnum; "absolutely nothing. I merely love birds, such as song sparrows."

He beamed on Ruth, who coloured and looked straight ahead, in the pose that had been ordered.

"I think I hear one in the garden now," he added. "Being evidently in the way here, I'll go out where I'm appreciated."

"Good-bye," said Eliot.

"Oh, Uncle Alec, don't go!" cried Ruth. "Mr. Eliot is horrid!"

But he had already gone.

"I hope you don't really mind my working coatless this hot day," Eliot said. "I'm afraid I usually forget to be polite when I'm on a job which absorbs me."

"I don't mind," Ruth answered, "when—when you say 'us artists.'"

"But you don't doubt that you are an artist?"

"Oh, yes, always! I *want* to be, but the artists were the men who wrote the songs. I'm a kind of phonograph. But I try to feel what they felt when they made the songs, and to re-create the mood. That's something, isn't it?"

She spoke eagerly, forgetful of her earlier sensations. Somehow it was natural to talk thus intimately to this man, who was nearly her own age and who understood. He answered, and kept on painting; and before she realized the flight of time, or even how stiff her body was, he ordered the sitting over. She came around and looked at the sketchy beginnings of her portrait, listening eagerly to his explanations. Then he went out to wash his hands and on his return they tackled Purcell. She had mastered the rhythmic swing of "Come unto these

yellow sands," and was pouring it out with full-throated abandon, standing close to Eliot and reading the words over his shoulder, when Alec Farnum sneaked back to the house and peeped into the room. He withdrew again softly.

Thereafter the picture grew apace, and Ruth no longer drew near the Bird House with reluctant feet. She began to live for those sittings. Uncle Alec often remained in the room for an hour or more, and the three of them talked—a mixture of banter and jest and seriousness. She had never been included in such talks before—she had never heard such talks, in fact. Should pictures "tell a story?" She didn't know what this meant at first, and the two men almost swore at each other trying to explain simultaneously. Are all the melodies in the world used up, so that modern music has to adopt tone painting as an ideal? Shall women vote? Is Socialism really inimical to individuality, or not? A thousand topics came and went in these talks, and Ruth almost felt that she had just begun to live. Then Uncle Alec would go out to work in his shop, or his garden, and she would ask Eliot questions about some topic which she had not understood, and he would answer her gravely, and she would find herself almost thinking out aloud to him as she struggled to see things as he did.

Then, when the sitting was over, she would always come around the easel to see how the picture was growing, standing by his side, and after that they would sing.

The picture was nearing completion now. It was going to be Robert Eliot's bid for the winter Academy. He had put the best he had into it, and he was pleased with it—and dissatisfied. He and Ruth were looking at it, the sitting over.

"The glass over the print is too realistic," he said. "I want the whole thing detailed and yet decorative, too, but I've got that photographic. And you are not right—your face. It's not eager enough. You are too still, too passive. A spark in the eye, a little parting of the lips—— Oh, gee, I'd like to do it all over again!"

"I think it is lovely, only the picture of me isn't good. That girl there is—is pretty," said Ruth.

Eliot looked down at her, and laughed softly. "I suppose you don't know that you are lovely?" he said.

Ruth coloured and dropped her eyes. "I know I'm not," she answered.

"Then you are strangely ignorant," he smiled, and laid his brush on the easel rack before he took up her hand. She shivered at the touch of his fingers, but let her hand lie passive in his while

he said: "Look! Look at your own hand, and your wrist, and your arm; aren't they lovely?"

With face averted, she shook her head. He pulled at her hand till she faced the canvas. "Now look at the girl there—only the pale, painted echo of you. Isn't she less beautiful than you are?"

Still Ruth shook her head, and drew her hand away.

"You have too much cosmos in your ego!" he laughed. "Let us sing."

Ruth couldn't sing that afternoon. She tried, but some emotion choked her. She failed miserably in her first attack, and Eliot ran a glissando over the keyboard and faced around on the bench. "Hello!" he said.

"I—I can't sing to-day. I don't know why." She had averted her face. It seemed as if she were about to weep.

The man suddenly took both her hands in his, though she tried to snatch them away. "What is it, tell me, Ruth?" he said. "It's been *our* picture, and our songs—you and I working together. Tell me."

"Please let me go!" she whispered, and suddenly left him. But on the way home she began to sing the song she had attempted in the Bird House, and the attack peeled out quite flawless, to the astonish-

ment of Minnie Sanborn who was passing on the road.

The next day Alec Farnum lingered when the sitting began.

"By the way, Ruth," he said, "going to the dance to-night? I see there's to be one in the Town Hall."

Ruth shot a vindictive glance at him. "No," she answered. "Nobody has asked me."

"What's the matter with Tom Cook?" he inquired. He watched Eliot, out of the corner of his eye, who rewarded him by pricking up his ears immediately.

"He's away camping. Isn't it too bad?" Ruth answered sweetly.

Uncle Alec laughed, and presently went out with a remark that neither of them seemed very entertaining that afternoon.

When he had gone, Eliot broke the silence. "Who is Tom Cook?" he said bluntly.

Ruth felt suddenly and gloriously coquettish. "Oh, just a man," she said.

"I don't suppose you'd go to the dance with me?"

"How can I tell till you've asked me?"

"Well, will you?"

"Do you dance well?"

"Oh, fair to middling."

"No, I won't."

“Why not?”

Ruth laughed, she laughed gayly, and then grew suddenly sober. “Don’t you think it would be nicer to sing to Uncle Alec this evening? We’ve not sung for him since that night of his party, only practised afternoons. He loves music, you know.”

“Much nicer,” cried Eliot, and he stopped painting and looked into Ruth’s eyes. She returned his gaze for a second and then dropped back into her pose, but the air was electrical. The sitting ceased early. They moved to the piano. “We must get something ready for to-night” she said.

He put “Mary Grey of Allan Dale” on the rack, and Ruth sung it in her tender, virginal voice. Eliot let the last chord die away slowly, and faced her.

“Ruth!” he said, and took her hands. “I have painted you into my life, into my heart. Tell me Tom Cook is nobody!”

She let her hands rest in his. She let him draw her down on the bench beside him, she let her face fall against his shoulder, and with a thrill words could not express she felt his arm encircle her.

“There was never anybody,” she whispered. “Is it real, are you real? Tell me I shan’t wake up.”

He kissed her softly on the neck where it curved toward her shoulder. “You have the loveliest little

neck in the world," he said irrelevantly. "But won't old Uncle Alec be surprised!"

Ruth sat suddenly straight up and blurted out, "Oh, no, he won't! Oh, what have I done! You'll hate me! He brought you here because—because—well, he likes me and he was afraid I'd like Tom Cook or somebody like that. He *meant* this to happen. I didn't know he was going to bring you. I tried to keep away. I was ashamed. Oh, what shall I do!"

She tried to struggle out of his arms, but he only held her faster, and laughed in her ear. "The blessed old Fairy Godfather!" he exclaimed. "The blessed old matchmaker in trousers! But how did he ever know God made us for each other?"

"You—you don't believe *I* had a hand in it, then?" she whispered.

"Kiss me!" he commanded.

She looked up, she raised her face toward his, their lips met—and as they parted they were aware of the Bird House Man coming angrily through the door.

"What are you doing, you ungrateful young hound?" he shouted. "You come into my house as a guest and you violate my hospitality and try to make off with my song sparrow! I've a good mind to thrash you here and now. Explain, both of you

—instantly! You, too, Ruth! What do you mean by such conduct!”

He was in a towering passion and Eliot rose, pale and angry in his turn, and opened his mouth to speak, putting himself in front of the girl. But Ruth burst out laughing.

“You old fraud!” she said. “I’ve *told* him. He *knows*. He’s forgiven you, too, for which you ought to be thankful.”

“Well, his forgiveness will be worth more ten years hence,” said Alec Farnum, bursting into a broad grin. “Now, you go home and bring your mother here to supper, while Rob gets that chromo out of the middle of the room and I get my one bottle of champagne out of the cellar.”

“Don’t you call it a chromo!” said Ruth. “It’s a masterpiece!”

“It’s a romance!” said Rob.

“It’s a nuisance,” said Alec Farnum. “It’s a smelly thing, too.”

Ruth went suddenly up to him, flung her arms about his neck, and kissed him. He patted her clumsily on the back, and when she had gone he wiped his glasses.

CHAPTER II

THE WREN

THE Bird House Man's garden, behind his old-fashioned house and his shop where Farnum's Famous Bird Houses were made, was white with snow. The sundial and the two bird baths were hidden under protecting boxes. The flower beds were covered with pine boughs, bits of which stuck up above the drifts. But the feed tables for the birds, including one which swung into the wind by means of its weather-vane arms, were standing about stocked with suet and sunflower seeds, and just now Alec Farnum himself stood outside the kitchen door with a sunflower seed between his lips. His head was tipped back, and he held one hand in front of his face, with his forefinger out. There were excited sounds and movements in the big lilac bush by the door, and suddenly a chickadee made a dash forth, lit on Alec's finger and, as the man moved his hand close to his face, took the seed from between his lips and flew quickly back to the bush. The man smiled, and was about to place another seed in his mouth when around the corner came the front end

of a dog, followed in time by the rest of him, and in sudden fright the chickadees flew away to a tree in the garden.

"Confound you, Bologna, what did you come to spoil the fun for?" Alec asked of the intruder. "Get out!"

He made as if to kick the dachshund, which sidled off with a surprised and pained expression. At the same moment from the street came a faint call, "Friedy, Friedy!"

The dog pricked up his ears and looked guilty, but did not stir.

"H'm," said the Bird House Man, "none so deaf— You want a bone, do you? Well, you can't have one. You've scared my chickadees."

So saying he left the dog to sniff at the garbage pail, and walked around the corner toward the street. Standing on the sidewalk was a quaint little figure, looking up and down the snowy road. She might have stepped from the pages of "Cranford," Alec thought to himself as he looked at her, she was so obviously an "unappropriated blessing." She was small and neat; no, neat wasn't the word, he reflected. Her hat was even stylish. She was trim. Her heavy hair beneath the hat was still a golden chestnut, though a trifle rusty. Once it had hung in two long braids which Alec used to

pull in school when she was a little thing and he was one of the big boys, born to torment. Her eyes were very large. Once they must have been a glory, but now that her face had shrunk they gave her an odd, wistful expression, intensified at the present moment, as she turned to meet Alec's gaze, by her worry over the loss of her pet.

"Oh, Alec, have you seen him?" she exclaimed.

"What's the matter, Millie, has the sausage man got Bologna at last?" Alec replied. "It's an outrage, that's what it is!"

A faint smile crept into Miss Millie Tilton's face. "You are perfectly horrid," she said. "You know his name is Siegfried. But where is he? I shouldn't have let him off the leash. He always misbehaves on cold days. Here, Friedy, Friedy!"

Friedy suddenly appeared around the corner of the house, hauling his rear legs behind him, with a suspicious stain of garbage in either corner of his mouth.

"Oh, you nasty dog!" said Miss Millie.

"You may break, you may train up the dog as you will,
But the scent of the garbage will call to him still,"

said Alec.

"But he gets such nice food at home," said the woman plaintively. "I go out to Mulready's cart

myself and select it. I think dogs are very ungrateful—so there, Friedy.”

She bent and slapped the dog as she spoke, the dog construing it as a caress and licking his chops.

“They’re only human, after all,” said the Bird House Man. “Come in and have some tea, Millie. It’s a cold day.”

“Oh, Alec, what an idea!” she exclaimed, looking at him with her big eyes.

“Now, Millie, you’ve been reading modern dramas again,” said he. “I’m sure I don’t know where you get ’em. There’s nothing modern in our public library. You think it would be a regular third act if you came in and drank tea with me.”

“I should say an irregular act,” said Miss Millie, with the ghost of a twinkle.

The Bird House Man laughed jovially. He always laughed when Miss Millie made a joke, and treasured it to repeat to his friend, Thomas Trask, the new doctor.

“How long since you’ve committed an irregular act?” he asked.

“I never did,” the woman retorted. “I never *dared*, in Southmead.” She spoke in a low, confidential tone.

“Well, far be it from me to start an innocent young female on a career of crime,” said Alec, “so

"I'll tell you that Ruth Barnes is inside, typing a new article for me, so you can come in for some tea after all."

"Oh, is Ruth there? She's going to be married next summer, isn't she? Is he as nice as he looks?"

"Not nice enough for Ruth—nobody is," said Alec, opening the door for her with his air of old-fashioned gallantry.

They heard the measured click, click of the typewriter keys as they stepped into the house, and went to the library where Ruth was working. But she refused to stop, only rising to kiss Miss Millie on the cheek. "I've got to get this done by daylight, Uncle Alec," she declared. "You haven't had the drop-light fixed yet, you know. Goodness, I don't know *what* the house will be like after I'm gone!"

"Like any empty bird's nest," said Alec Farnum fondly, as he escorted Miss Millie into the dining-room, where he always had tea served on his old mahogany table. Siegfried followed, and immediately made a wad of the hearth rug and plumped upon it.

"Oh, dear, he's the *worst* dog!" said his mistress.

"You mean the wienerwurst," laughed Alec, calling to Mrs. Plumb for the tea.

Miss Millie pouted at him with a curious girlish-

ness that belied her years, but she did not endeavour to reply. Evidently she felt the task hopeless.

“And now, Millie,” said the big man beside her at the table, when he had seen her wants supplied, “what’s on your mind?”

She seemed undeniably startled, and her big eyes sought his for a second, and then fell. “Why—no-nothing. Why do you ask?”

“Ho, so there *is* something, eh?” said he. “Well, why shouldn’t you tell me? ’Most everybody else in this town does! Carrie Potter came to me this morning to know where she was to get a baby carriage on runners big enough to hold her twins. I told her she had no business to have twins, on her husband’s income——”

Miss Millie was blushing, and the Bird House Man broke off. “H’m—modern plays again,” he smiled. “Well, Millie, what *is* on your mind? You don’t own New Haven shares, do you?”

“Oh, no, thank goodness!” she replied. “Dear papa did not leave me much, as you may have guessed. The emoluments of teaching and literature are not great, as he used to say so often. But what he did leave was invested in bonds. Dear papa was very conservative.”

“Yes, I recall he was, especially about my marks

in school," said Alec Farnum. "How much did he leave you?"

It was not the sort of a question most people could have asked of Miss Millie Tilton with impunity, but Alec seemed to await her reply quite confidently.

"Twelve thousand dollars," she said.

"And your income is about six hundred dollars a year?"

"Five hundred and sixty."

"Well, Millie, that's not so bad," smiled the man. "You can buy an automobile and a portable garage nowadays for that. Is it the make of car that's troubling you?"

"I don't want a car," she answered, with the utmost solemnity; "I want a home!"

Alec Farnum looked at her, and saw at once that he had stumbled on the truth. His brow contracted and he stroked his grizzled goatee a long moment in silence, while the brisk click of the typewriter under Ruth's agile young fingers came through the open door from the study.

"What's the matter with your Cousin Sarah's?" he asked presently.

Miss Millie took an oatmeal cake daintily between her fingers and bit it before she replied. There was almost an audacious light in her big eyes.

"Cousin Sarah, for one thing," she said.

Alec Farnum tipped back his head and laughed again, so loudly that the sound of the typewriter ceased and Siegfried got up and walked slowly around the table, looking up into his face.

"What's the matter with Cousin Sarah?" he asked presently.

"Well, she's an anti, for one thing," Miss Millie replied.

The man was too genuinely astonished this time to laugh. "Of course she is," said he. "But you—you don't mean to tell me that you——"

"Certainly I am!" retorted Miss Millie with great spirit. "See!" She threw open her jacket and displayed upon her waist a yellow "Votes for Women" pin. "I consider that I'm quite as capable of voting intelligently as some of the *men* in this town!"

"Certainly you are—my Lord, yes!" exclaimed Alec. "But do you *want* to?"

"Not particularly," she said, with one of her ghosts of a smile. "But I don't want to be told that I'm not good enough to. Besides, it's lots of fun wearing this button in front of some people we could name."

Alec smiled. "What first made you a suffragist?" he asked.

"Sarah," Miss Millie replied.

Again the Bird House Man tipped back his head and laughed. He was having a delightful time apparently. "Well, well," he said, "the antis always are the strongest speakers for the cause, they tell me. What else has Sarah done?"

"She doesn't like Siegfried, she isn't nice to him," said Miss Millie.

"Not nice to Bologna? The idea! Such a beautiful dog, too, with his gazelle-like gait!"

"Oh, I don't mind what *you* say," the woman retorted. "You know, when Pitti-Sing, my Japanese poodle, died, Sarah wanted me to get a canary. She said it would be better company for me, because its sounds were more musical. What she really meant was that she didn't want me to have a dog *at all*."

"Poor Katisha—I mean Pitti-Sing," said Alec Farnum. "She was such a sweet, fat thing, too, with her broken nose and that one flea neither she nor you could ever catch. I always did admire the woodcraft of that flea! What else has Sarah done?"

"Well, I don't like her tea. You have such nice tea, by the way, Alec."

Alec nodded in acknowledgment. "I'm very particular about it," said he, "since that Doctor Trask person made me give up my Bourbon. I can understand your feelings toward anybody who serves

the English breakfast variety. Do you suppose the entire British breakfast is as bad as the tea? What else has Sarah done?"

"Oh, it isn't what she has *done*," Miss Millie burst out suddenly, as if a dam of silence had given way, behind which a reservoir of feelings had been long pent up. "Sarah just *is*. She gets on my nerves—there, I've said it, and I feel better! She just naturally takes the contrary side, and she always thinks the worst of people she possibly can, and she thinks anybody who doesn't get up at six-thirty—who doesn't *like* to get up at six-thirty—is a lost soul, and—and—and I want a house, a *whole house*, of my own, where I can do as I please and have what I want to eat when I want it, and not talk for hours, and keep another dog to play with Friedy."

Little Miss Millie's eyes were very big, and suspiciously moist, as she half hid her face over her teacup.

Alec Farnum played a tattoo with his fingertips on the table. "H'm," said he. "You pay Sarah board, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes."

"How much?"

"Six dollars a week. I have a big room of my own, to be sure; but if she wants to talk she just comes

right in and begins to dust, and she makes an awful fuss if I sit up after nine o'clock."

"Six dollars a week," Alec reflected. "Your income is a bit over ten dollars a week, isn't it? Doesn't leave you much for cigarettes and champagne. How do you manage always to look so stylish?"

Miss Millie blushed like a girl. "I have a knack," she said.

"You have, indeed. Did you ever try to get a house of your own?"

"Oh, yes, I've looked about. But it would have to be a very tiny house that I could take care of myself and that wouldn't cost much to heat, and you know there aren't any such houses in town, which I could live in. The only ones of that sort are—are *hovels*, inhabited by the lowest of the working classes."

"True," said Alec, "and we have no New York apartments in Southmead, either, like swallows' nests in a cliff. Have you got any furniture to put in a house?"

"Oh, yes, after dear papa died and I had to go to live with Sarah, I saved some furniture from the sale. Sarah has been glad enough to use it in her house, you may be sure! I shall never part with it. Some day——"

Miss Millie broke off abruptly.

"Millie," said the Bird House Man, "you should have got married—no, I've not phrased that right, you should get married."

The woman turned her big eyes upon him with a strange look of startled shyness.

"Oh, Alec," she answered, very low, "how can you say that? *You*——"

"Ruth tells me *I* should have married, too," he replied. "I think she doesn't know. Some day I shall tell her."

"About Elsie?"

"About Elsie. She doesn't know that once I dreamed of bringing Elsie here, to the house of my fathers that—that Elsie's presence has peopled these rooms."

"And yet you say I should have married!"

"Even if you are a suffragist," said Alec with a little smile, "I'm going to tell you that in a woman's case it is different. A man has plenty of resources outside of marriage, a woman few, at least a woman like you in Southmead, Millie. Now, if you could take a big house and board all the teachers, that would be a fine thing for you and the teachers both, and——"

"No, it wouldn't," she said. "I should worry myself to death, and probably the teachers would starve."

"I suppose so," the man smiled; "which proves my point. So you live with Cousin Sarah and take Bologna out for exercise. No, you should have married. What's Bologna? You should have had children——"

"Don't, Alec, don't!" came a low voice.

Alec put out his big hand and patted hers under the table. "That's all right," he said. "Let's talk about it, both of us. It will make us feel better."

"I've—I've got a whole trunk full of linen up in Sarah's attic," she said. "It's locked. Sarah thinks it is stuff from papa's house. I've never told her. It was linen for—for our home. I hemmed all the napkins. They are lovely, too. Albert used to laugh at me—he said it would be cheaper to buy them. But that wouldn't be the same, would it?"

"No, no, of course not."

"We used to plan to have a house some day like the old Dwight place, with big columns in front. It was such fun! Albert would draw pictures of it. I have one of them now—I keep it in a box with his watch and his silver pencil. His mother gave those to me. You and she were the only ones who knew. We were going to tell just when——"

She paused and dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. Then she added: "The drawing is all

cracking along the folds. Do you think I could paste it on a piece of cardboard?"

"I'm sure you could," said Alec Farnum, averting his face.

"You—you *have* the house you planned for Elsie," Miss Millie went on, "before she—she——"

"Before she ran away," the man helped her. "Say it, Millie. There used to be no secrets between us four in those far-off years, when we were young and had dreams and passions. Those far-off years——"

"Oh, Alec, what has become of our youth, of our dreams?" she suddenly said with a little wail. "You think I do nothing but exercise Friedy. I—I—am housekeeper for a memory!"

Again he patted her hand under the table, and they were both silent.

Just then Ruth came breezily into the room. "Well, you two are a long while about your tea!" she cried cheerfully. "It's getting dark, and no lights on, either! I've finished the article, Uncle Alec."

"Good for you, Ruth," said the Bird House Man; "run and get some fresh tea for yourself, will you?"

"I will that," she laughed, "for your article was awfully technical—and *dry*." She picked up an oatmeal cookie along with the teapot, and stuffed it hungrily into her mouth.

Miss Millie quickly dried her tears while Ruth was gone, and they were both looking at her when she returned, a tall, straight, girlish figure, healthy and happy and young—and they were both thinking the same thoughts.

That night Alec Farnum sat with Dr. Thomas Trask in the library of the Bird House, before a roaring fire. The two men stretched out in comfortable male fashion in easy chairs, and both were smoking pipes.

“A wren, that’s what she is—a poor little wren twittering under alien eaves with no place to build her nest,” Alec Farnum was saying.

“Can’t you find her a husband?” asked the doctor, who was a youngish man with a lank body, a dark, thin face, and merry eyes.

“It would be easier to build her a house,” the other replied. “Yes, that’s what I’ve decided to do. You know this place next to mine is for sale. There is about a two-hundred-foot frontage with the present dwelling at one side. I’m going to build her a little house all her own on the side toward my place and rent it to her. Of course she can’t afford to build one for herself. She can’t touch any of that twelve thousand dollar capital. It’s all she has to live on.”

“What is it—‘the emoluments of teaching and literature?’ What did dear papa write?”

"A history of Southmead antiquities," laughed Alec, "and some poems. I actually believe the good man paid to have 'em printed. I've got a copy somewhere. You know the kind—in the style of Pope. Shelley and Wordsworth might never have lived for all the influence they had on a certain type of New Englander fifty years ago. He was a good teacher, though, of the old-fashioned school. He got me into Amherst, which was something of a feat. Loved opera, too, especially Wagner, in his last years, which was curious. Once he took Millie to New York for the Christmas holidays, and they heard 'Siegfried,' the 'Valkyrie,' 'Lucia,' and 'The Mikado,' in one wild debauch. She's named all her dogs after operatic characters ever since. Poor Millie!"

"But can she afford to rent a house?" the doctor asked, resuming the original thread.

"She can of me," smiled Alec. "I can buy the place for eight thousand dollars and build her a house for two thousand dollars. That makes ten thousand dollars. I'll get four hundred or five hundred dollars a year rent out of the house that's now on it, and charge her—let me see—well, about ten dollars a month, maybe. Oh, I'm a shrewd business man, I won't lose anything!"

"So I see! I suppose you'll also give her vegetables out of your garden?"

"Yes, surely, and apples and potatoes. Bless you, I have more than I know what to do with, always."

The doctor smiled. "Pity you haven't got a coal mine on the place," said he.

"Tommy, you strangely fail to understand the subtleties of life in Southmead," said the Bird House Man. "It would be *charity* to give her coal."

The doctor smiled again. "I'm learning," he said. "Does she know of your decision?"

"Mercy, no! She won't till the house is begun. Then she shall see the plans. Neither do you know it. You've not heard a word. And, especially, you never even guessed the real secret of the little wren—that in this dwelling she will housekeep for a memory, for the ghost of a dear fellow who lies up the road there under a white stone surrounded by your patients. He was my best friend in my boyhood."

"So that is it?" said the doctor, looking at the older man with undisguised affection. "You can rely on my professional ethics, even if you don't on my professional ability." He laughed quietly and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

A few days later Alec Farnum bought the property adjoining his own, and when he returned from his next lecture trip he brought a roll of blue prints and summoned Ruth and Miss Millie to a confer-

ence. When the prints were spread on the table, the corners weighted with teacups, and the women knew what they meant, Ruth threw her arms about the man's neck and kissed him. Then she told Miss Millie she ought to do the same, much to that lady's evident embarrassment.

"I—I do feel as if I ought to, really," she said, and her faded cheeks blushed rosy.

"Don't hesitate at all, Millie," laughed the Bird House Man. "Ruth will never tell."

It was an excited conference which followed. Miss Millie timidly, but with flushed, eager face, made suggestions about closets, and Ruth insisted on a larger bathroom at the expense of the guest-chamber. "Because Miss Millie will take a bath oftener than she'll have guests," she said, to Miss Millie's embarrassment, and the conference presently broke up, all three plotters pledged to secrecy.

"I don't know what Sarah will say when she hears!" poor Miss Millie declared, the joy going out of her eyes.

"You leave Sarah to me," said Alec Farnum.

Work on the Wren's Nest, as Alec always called it thereafter, began as soon as the frost was out of the ground, and it wasn't long before Miss Millie's Cousin Sarah and all the town as well knew what the operations meant. It was never discovered who

told. Doctor Trask swore he never did. Ruth swore she never did. The Bird House Man swore he never did. Miss Millie was quite positive that she had never given the slightest intimation.

"It must have been Bologna," Alec declared.

Cousin Sarah descended upon Alec almost immediately, finding him busy in his shop filling a rush order for martins' houses, from a city park.

"What do you mean, Alec Farnum," she cried, storming through the door, "by putting this silly notion into Millie's head that she's going to keep house by herself?"

"What do you mean, Sarah, by laying it off on me?" he answered, still busy with his saw. "Millie's old enough to have a few ideas of her own."

"She's old enough, Lord knows! But she's never had 'em. You know perfectly well that she never had an idea of her own in her life."

Alec laid down his saw and regarded the plain, square-jawed woman in front of him, whose habitual expression might best be described as one of aggressive discontent.

"Well, now, I wouldn't go so far as to say that," he replied. "She showed a good bit of initiative in getting a dachshund instead of a canary."

"Humph," said Miss Sarah, "I always suspected you put her up to that!"

"Perish the thought!" he cried. "I should have suggested a Great Dane. Little Millie being tugged along the street by a Great Dane would be a sight worth seeing. It would be like a sloop yacht towed by the *Mauretania*."

"Humph!" said Miss Sarah again. "We are getting away from the point, which is that Millie isn't going into this foolish scheme."

"Oh, is that the point? Well, then, it's between you and her. Why drag me in? She's signed the lease for five years, and I agree to have the house ready for occupancy on July first. It's purely business on my part, I assure you. Of course, if she—or you—wants to pay the forfeit to get out of the lease, why——"

"Don't be a fool, Alec," said the woman.

"Well, I should be one if I put up a special house for a special tenant, and then let 'em back out, now wouldn't I be?" He began to hammer a nail energetically.

"Yes, you would, if she'd asked you to put it up. But she didn't. You needn't try to bamboozle me. Millie ain't fit to take care of a house by herself, and live all alone. Besides, it ain't safe or proper. She's my kith and kin, not yours, and I feel responsible for her."

Alec was tempted to say, "For six dollars per," but he refrained.

"No, she's not my kith and kin," he answered; "but the fact that she's yours doesn't give you any right to deny her the freedom to live her life as she chooses. She chooses to have a house of her own, for reasons best known to herself, and I'm going to help her have it. That's flat, Sarah."

Alec's jaw could set as squarely as Miss Sarah's, and she evidently realized it as she looked at him.

"Well, it's a mighty high-handed, interferin' proceeding, that's all I can say!" she exclaimed.

"You'll have no trouble getting another boarder," Alec added with a smile.

"It's one thing to make a home for your cousin; it's quite another to take boarders," she replied.

"Well, that's true, too," said he, laying down his hammer thoughtfully. "Still, Sarah, I don't honestly think a little humility will hurt you a bit."

"Don't you? Well, I don't think a few manners would hurt *you* a bit. Good morning!"

She flounced with stiff dignity from the shop, and Alec resumed his work, with a frown between his eyes.

"Oh, this pride!" he said to Ruth when she came in presently to tell him that Rob Eliot had sold another picture and was coming up to spend Sunday. "This pride! Of course, poor Millie could no more

earn her living than a child. But that Sarah person—why shouldn't she work like the rest of us?"

"There's not much money in one boarder," said Ruth. "I know her; she doesn't want to lose Miss Millie's furniture. Half the best things in her house belong to Miss Millie. *And* she doesn't want to lose that twelve thousand dollars. She thinks if Miss Millie goes away she wouldn't get the money if her cousin should die."

"It takes a woman to think of a thing like that!" exclaimed Alec. "Do you know, it had never occurred to me?"

"It wouldn't—to you," Ruth laughed. "Are you going to stop building?"

"Are you going to be sorry to see Rob again?" he answered, and smiled at the gladness he saw in her eyes.

The Wren's Nest went up apace, and Miss Millie and Bologna watched every stage of the process. There was no house in Southmead quite like it—so small yet so pretty. It was two stories and a half high, and stood beneath a great elm tree. Downstairs there was a tiny hall, a sitting-room with a tiny fireplace, a dining-room big enough to get a table in, a kitchen big enough to get a range in, and a tiny rear hall where the ice box was to be kept, together with a tiny pantry. Upstairs the plans

called for two chambers, a bathroom, and a huge closet—relatively huge, at least. The stairs to the attic went up out of this closet, and there was a window in it. It was Miss Millie's own idea. As soon as the carpenters had built the frame of the stairs from the lower hall, she ascended, with Ruth to steady her, over the loose boards, Siegfried waddling on behind, and gazed lovingly at that closet.

"It's almost a room!" she breathed ecstatically. "And think how light it will be! You can see every moth!"

"You won't have any moths in a new house," said Ruth.

"Oh, my dear, we have moths *always* with us, like the poor," said Miss Millie.

The Wren's Nest was completed spot on time, and spot on time Miss Millie arrived, bag and baggage, preceded several days, however, by the bulk of her furniture (it didn't take much to furnish the Wren's Nest) and all her new curtains, which she had been busily engaged upon for weeks before. Her Cousin Sarah had relented somewhat, and had helped her hang these curtains and do the cleaning, which Alec thought very handsome under the circumstances.

"You know, Ruth," he said, "Sarah can hardly

construe it as a compliment that Millie doesn't want to live with her."

"Handsome!" sniffed the girl. "She's afraid not to keep some string on that twelve thousand dollars! I hope Miss Millie lives years and years longer than she does!"

"A very unchristian thought, and I'm ashamed of you," said Alec Farnum with great severity.

On the evening of July first he and Ruth and Rob Eliot (who had arrived for the summer, and who hoped with the proceeds of his summer painting to marry Ruth in the autumn, for the poor fellow had not done so well that winter as he expected) went ceremoniously up the steps of the Wren's Nest and pushed the bell, being greeted by the yips of Siegfried behind the screen door.

"Now, Rob, you must be very nice to her," Ruth whispered. "Never mind if I did get most of her supper and you did stack all her kindlings an hour ago, we come ceremoniously now, as if we'd never seen the house."

Miss Millie was heard coming to the door.

"Good evening," said the Bird House Man. "Is this the home of Miss Tilton?"

Miss Millie laughed.

"Is she at home?"

Miss Millie giggled.

"Ah, you are she? May I present my young friends, Paul and Virginia. We have come to view your palatial abode, and pay our compliments to its charming mistress."

They all came in and inspected the house with the utmost gravity, Miss Millie running ahead, apologizing for the clutter—"You know, it takes such a while to get settled, even in a *small* house"—and Siegfried getting under everybody's feet, till finally he had to be deposited by force upon his little cushion on the end of the parlour sofa.

The house was voted an unqualified success, and then Miss Millie produced two bottles of ginger ale from her tiny ice box, and fluttered in with them upon a tray. She got Alec aside presently. "I want to give a dinner party to-morrow night," she whispered. "You and me, and those two. They are young, they are so in love—— I want to have my—my napkins on the table. Do you think they will come? Al—Albert would have liked me to do it, don't you think?"

The Bird House Man patted her hand. "He would, Millie, I know," said he softly. "We'll be here."

They all were. Ruth was there early and helped Miss Millie get the dinner. When Alec and Rob came from the Bird House at seven o'clock there

were candles on the table in the tiny dining-room and linen which Alec sniffed, detecting the faint odour of lavender, while Ruth and Miss Millie were still talking excitedly in the kitchen.

"Thirty years," he whispered; "thirty years!"

"What's that?" asked the young man.

"Nothing. I was just rumbling," the other replied. "Do you suppose we'll really get anything to eat?"

"Ruth is a very good cook," said Rob solemnly, and then grinned when the Bird House Man burst into a roar.

Little Miss Millie sat at the head of her tiny board and beamed nervously upon her guests at first; but as the meal progressed and nothing went wrong, and Alec produced a bottle of port from a basket he had smuggled in and they drank to her health and the health of her house and the talk waxed merry, Alec Farnum expanding in his mellowest mood, her big eyes grew bright with happiness, her cheeks grew flushed, and suddenly Alec, looking at her, exclaimed:

"Hello, Millie! I vow you look just like that picture Sammy took of you when you went to New York for the opera!"

"Oh, Alec, that was twenty-five years ago!" she said. "I was just Ruth's age—or a little older,"

she added honestly. But she blushed rosy in her joy.

Ruth wouldn't let her clear the table. "No, you sit with Uncle Alec in the parlour," she declared, "and Rob and I will do the dishes."

"Oh, I couldn't! In *my* house, at *my* party? The idea!"

"Take her away, Uncle Alec," cried Ruth; and Alec took her, his big arm about her waist, and swung her like a feather into the parlour. There they sat and heard the gay laughter of the lovers out in the kitchen, and spoke little. Only once she sighed. "Oh, it's a home at last, all my own, thanks to you, dear Alec. If—if—no, I won't think of that!"

"Yes, think of it to-night," said Alec Farnum, patting her hand. "Think of it. It will do you good."

She bowed her head and wept softly, while the man pulled the dog's long ears. Presently she looked up and smiled upon her friend wistfully, as much as to say, "There, I've put the Presence away for now!" and he smiled back, not needing any words. The lovers returned, laughing, from the kitchen, and before the party broke up Ruth stood by the tiny mantel, fingering a mahogany clock that had belonged to dear papa, and sang "Home,

Sweet Home." She sang it softly in her fresh, clear, tender voice, and Rob watched her face, enthralled, with the gaze of a lover upon his adored, while Alec looked at the carpet and clasped his fingers together and Miss Millie cried softly without restraint.

Ruth's voice died away, and there was a long silence in the room. Then Alec Farnum rose, like a big Newfoundland rousing from sleep, looked about him, and cried: "Well, well, here we've all had a perfectly delightful time weeping. Let's go home before Ruth sings something cheerful and spoils the evening!"

His hearty voice broke the spell. Ruth looked at the clock her hand had been resting upon and pretended to be scandalized. Miss Millie protested that it was probably fast.

"If it was your papa's, it is!" said Alec. "His clocks were always ahead of time, just to make me tardy."

"You were always stopping to hunt for birds' nests on the way to school, that was the trouble with you," said Miss Millie.

She came to the door with them, giving each her hand with great ceremony. To Alec she spoke softly. "How can I ever thank you?" she said.

"I'll tell you," he declared. "By keeping that animated sausage of yours out of my garden. He

was in there to-day, right across my pansy bed! I warn you, if it happens again, I'll—I'll—I'll have Mrs. Plumb fry him!"

Miss Millie's eyes sparkled. "Friedy *never* walks in flower beds," she said.

"Well, he'll never walk in mine again, that's sure!" said Alec Farnum with great ferocity. "Good-night, madam."

"Isn't she a dear!" Ruth exclaimed as the lovers left the older man in front of the Bird House.

"A toy lady in a toy house, all alone," said Rob. "I think she's a bit pathetic." And his hand sought Ruth's in the darkness.

"Yes, all alone!" said the Bird House Man, so soberly that they watched him, surprised, as he entered the door of his own lonely dwelling.

CHAPTER III

THE LITTLE GRAY GOOSE

"GOOD morning, Mr. Farnum," said a girl in gray, as Alec Farnum came around the corner of a house on the outskirts of Southmead, into the backyard.

She was standing in the kitchen door, with a white apron over her gown, and smiled at him prettily. She was an extremely pretty girl, in fact, with large eyes of a colour usually described as baby blue, and hair so light it was almost golden. She was generally reported to be something of a coquette, and Alec didn't much wonder at it.

"Are you hunting birds' nests?" she added.

"Yes," said he, "and if you don't mind, I'm going to cut through your yard up the brook. I suspect a swamp sparrow up farther, in the alders."

"Not at all, only please don't take *all* the eggs," said she.

"Nary an egg," he answered, and went on, thinking how very pretty Marjory Damon was. It was a fine morning in early June and Alec Farnum pushed up the brook bed and into the alder swamp, as much occupied with the air and sunshine as with his search

for birds. He didn't find the nest he was seeking, and after a time he put his glasses back into the case, patted his pocket to see if his lunch was properly stowed, and pushed on into the upland woods. After three or four miles of leisurely tramping, broken by several pauses to watch a hermit thrush or a partridge, he crested the ridge and came down rapidly to a back road so little used that two parallel rows of grass were growing between the wheel ruts and the central path made by the horse. It was a pretty road winding over the upland, with glimpses of a valley here and there between the timber and a wealth of wild flowers on either side. Alec Farnum strolled along it till he should come to a brook, where he proposed to eat his lunch. He came to the brook presently, which tinkled down from the hill in a series of mossy waterfalls, passed under the road, and made off into the valley below. The man turned aside a few feet into the shade upstream, got out his tin cup and his pocketful of sandwiches and raisins, and lying luxuriously down close to the stream began to munch.

He had finished only one sandwich when he heard steps on the road, and in a moment a man appeared, spied the brook, cast a pack from his shoulders, and produced a folding cup from his pocket. As he stooped to dip Alec Farnum spoke.

"It's good water," he said, "and a long, dry way up the slope to reach it."

The man looked up, startled, seeing Alec for the first time.

"Hello!" said he. "Are you a son of the road, too?"

"No," said Alec, "I hate roads, except forgotten ones like this."

He looked at the newcomer narrowly—a young, spare man, with a smooth-shaven face so newly tanned that the skin was yet peeling on his forehead. He wore knickerbockers, and even Alec could tell by the look of it that his shirt was expensive. His khaki pack, however, which now lay by the brook, was old and well worn.

"I hate 'em, too," said he, "when they're full of motors. I tramp by the government survey maps, and take the roads where the contour intervals are thickest. This one looked good to me. Where does it lead to?"

"You're no son of the road, you're a fraud," said Alec.

"Why?"

"Because, if you were the real thing you'd not care where the road leads to. You'd like it better if you didn't know, in fact."

The young man laughed. "You're right," he

said. "I'm not yet emancipated from shirts—clean shirts. I've been on the road a week, and I want to get to my laundry. I had it expressed to a town called Southmead. Am I on the way to that metropolis?"

"As I've come from there since breakfast and I'm old enough to be your father, you might reach it by supper," Alec replied. "Have you some lunch?"

The other, for answer, unpacked his kit, produced a small fry pan from an oilcloth covering, and a jar of bacon and half a loaf of bread. Then he proceeded to make a small fire. Alec watched him in silence.

"That's a lot of trouble for a noon meal when you're on the road," he said.

"Not when you don't know what you're going to get at night," the other laughed. "Some of your Yankee hotels have horrible cold suppers—a small piece of cold corned beef, mostly gristle, on an oblong platter, soggy bread, and a piece of pale, discouraged custard pie! Besides, I *like* to make a little fire and hear the bacon sizzle, and then put it out when I depart and cast a backward glance at the embers. There's a pleasant little sadness in leaving a camp-fire, even where you've stopped but an hour. Do you know what I mean?"

"I have a vague idea," the older man smiled. "You live in a city, I take it?"

"Why do you take it?"

"Your clothes and your speech and your—pardon my saying so—somewhat naïve method of making a fire," Alec answered.

"What's the matter with my fire?" the other demanded good-naturedly.

"You've been feeding it with dead willow, that's all. Last winter we had a city chap in our town who wanted some 'good, hard wood,' so Pat Sweeny sold him three cords of 'good, hard willer.'"

Alec got up, took the other's sheath hatchet, and returned presently with a few split faggots of cherry. "Now you'll get some coals fit to cook with," he laughed. "Tell me about yourself. I like your face."

"Oh, there's nothing to tell."

"Everybody has something to tell," said the older man.

"I haven't. School, college, business, just the usual thing. I'm better at business than I was at school, but no great shakes at that. I can stand it only so long at a stretch, and then I have to dash off for a week or two, and tramp. New York gets on my nerves. A real business man would stay on the job."

"I suppose he would. What is your business?"

"Selling bonds. I have a partner. He's the real thing. Golf on Saturdays and Sundays satisfies

him. I had the capital to start the business; he has the brains to run it. Good combination, eh?"

"Does it take brains to sell bonds?" asked Alec.

The young man was not annoyed. He grinned amiably in fact. "Not so much as we on Wall Street think," he admitted.

Alec Farnum smiled also. "Well, there's no hotel in Southmead," he remarked, "so you'll have to stay with me. Perhaps I should tell you who I am."

"It's not necessary, I can see you're a regular feller," the other answered.

Alec bowed. "And you probably would know no better if I told you," said he. But he did tell. "That explains the field glasses," he added.

The young man laughed frankly. "No, I never heard of you," he admitted, "but I'm going to order all your books when I get back to town."

"Then you are my friend forever!" Alec cried.

"And you ought to like me, too," the other added, "because my name is Thomas Bird."

The two of them started out presently through the woods toward Southmead, chatting as they strolled. They talked about birds, not bonds, about camping and cooking, about the pleasures of the open. And presently they came down through the alder swamp and emerged into Marjory Damon's backyard.

It chanced that Marjory was again on the back

steps. She still had a big apron over her gray dress, and a pan of fudge in her hand.

"Hello again, Marjory!" cried Alec Farnum. "I caught a live bird, you see."

The girl coloured, and so did the young man.

"He's a Thomas Bird, Marjory," said Alec. "And, Thomas Bird, Marjory is a little gray goose. I know, because a girl who isn't half so pretty as she is told me so."

"Oh, Mr. Alec!" said Marjory, dropping the lashes over her large blue eyes.

"That might be almost any other girl," said Thomas Bird gallantly, looking at the figure on the steps.

"You ought to give him some fudge for that," said Alec.

Marjory laughed through her blushes, ran into the house for a knife, and proffered each of them a huge chunk on the end of the blade. They ate it slowly, with relish, and Alec watched the eyes of the young people playing the age-old game he always loved to see. Then he took his new friend home with him.

"A pretty girl, eh?" he asked when they reached the road.

"Do you always introduce pretty girls by their first names only?" asked Thomas Bird.

"Yes, if at all," laughed Alec. "Her last name is Damon, if that matters."

"Why do they call her a little gray goose?"

"They don't," said Alec. "They don't use the adjectives. Those are an addition of my own. I'll have to let my neighbour, Miss Millie—Miss Millie *Tilton*—explain that."

When they reached the Bird House, Mrs. Plumb, his housekeeper, in high indignation sent Alec off to purchase more provisions. "Do you think you're runnin' a hotel?" she demanded. Tom went along, too, after his laundry and his mail, and he sat down to supper in a clean shirt, with the contenting information that business was dull and he could stay away another week if he wished.

"Stay here and see Southmead," said Alec.

"Perhaps a day, if it isn't imposing," he answered. "I love your house, and your garden, and you. It's not much like Wall Street!"

"Not much," said Alec, "that's a fact."

After supper the Bird House Man disappeared a moment and brought Miss Millie Tilton back with him into the garden, where the young man was smoking his cigar.

"He wants to know why you call Marjory Damon a goose," said Alec.

Miss Millie (who was closely pursued by Sieg-

fried) coloured, and her large eyes grew pained. "Why, Alec, the idea!" she answered. "I'm sure I never called her any such thing."

"Still, why do you think she is one?" Alec persisted.

"Well, who wouldn't?" said Miss Millie suddenly. "A girl of her age wearing nothing but gray all the time—gray suits, gray dresses, gray furs—just because somebody told her once that was her colour! And the way she carries on with the boys! A flirt, that's what she is! If it hadn't been for her we wouldn't have had all those modern dances in Southmead. She went to Springfield for a week, just to learn 'em."

"Why, Millie, how you talk!" said Alec. "She can't help it if the boys run after her."

"No woman is run after who doesn't *want* to be," Miss Millie replied with great decision.

"Don't they all want to be?" Thomas Bird inquired.

Miss Millie froze him with a look, and followed by Siegfried returned through the fence to her own little dwelling.

"Now you know," said Alec, "perhaps. My personal belief is that Marjory wears gray because she looks like Edna May."

"Edna May was before my time," said Thomas Bird, naïvely, and wondered why his host chuckled.

He stayed a day in Southmead, he stayed two days, at the end of a week he was still there. The Bird House Man was very busy on an unexpected order for feed boxes and another for a magazine article, which came at the same time and forced him to leave his guest pretty much to his own devices. What those devices were became known to Alec before the week was up, and he wrote several letters to New York, chewing the end of a dead cigar in his study after his guest had gone to bed. The guest was still there when the answers came; it was ten days now. Alec read them one by one and seemed satisfied. "Besides," he thought to himself, "I don't believe the little gray goose is such a goose, anyway. She will give as good as she takes."

On the evening of the eleventh day Thomas Bird came suddenly into the study not long after nine. He had been calling on Marjory. His face wore a curious, grave look, and his lip line was straight and hard.

"Well, you are back early," said Alec cheerily.

"Yes, I must go in the morning," he said, and his voice was hard, too.

"Well, I *am* sorry," cried Alec. "It's been pleasant to have you here, even if I have been too busy to entertain you, so you had to fall back on—well, let

us say on your own resources. But why this sudden decision to leave? No bad news, I hope?"

The young man drew in his breath and expelled a cloud of smoke, for he had lighted a cigarette with fingers that made the match shake, Alec noted. He looked down at the floor, then he looked quickly at the kind, quizzical face of his host.

"Miss Tilton was right," he said briefly. "Now I must go pack."

"Oh, come," cried Alec, "let's talk that over a bit! I've known Millie to be wrong before now."

But Tom Bird only shook his head. "I'm sorry, but, if you don't mind, I'd—I'd rather not talk about it. Good-night, sir."

The odd, boyish address at the end struck Alec silent, and he let his guest depart upstairs.

"The poor beggar's really hard hit!" he exclaimed to himself. "I wonder if Millie *is* right."

He did not try to resume the discussion in the morning, but bade his new friend a hearty good-bye and shipped him off to the station. Then he sawed and nailed and painted energetically all day, but he did not whistle as he worked.

That evening as he sat in his study the doorbell rang, and Mrs. Plumb showed Marjory in. She wore a gray muslin that was almost white and her eyes looked unusually large.



“‘Yes,’ she went on . . . ‘You must go with me, because if it hadn’t been for you he would never have met me. You were to blame in the first place.’”

"He's gone, hasn't he?" she said briefly and at once.

"Sit down," Alec commanded, pushing a chair where the light would fall on her face. "Yes, he's gone."

"I am going after him, and you are going with me," she continued with curious decision.

The Bird House Man removed his pipe from his lips and whistled. "Is that so?" said he. "I wish you wouldn't be so sudden with your news."

"Yes," she went on, without the trace of a smile on her face, "you must go with me, because if it hadn't been for you he would never have met me. You were to blame in the first place."

"To blame for what?" asked the man, watching her narrowly.

She did not blush nor try to avoid his eyes. "To blame for my loving him," she said.

"And did he go away because you love him?"

"He went away, I think, because he believes that I don't love him," she answered. "I am going to tell him that he is wrong. If you will not go with me, I shall go alone."

"Have you been reading 'Man and Superman?'"

"I don't know what you mean; I never heard of it," she said.

"Well, let that pass," Alec smiled. "But before

I take a trip to New York with the most attractive young girl in town I want to know a little more about the causes for such a momentous proceeding."

A frown gathered between the girl's eyes. She seemed to be struggling to master her ideas. Finally she spoke. "Mr. Alec," she said, "you know my mother and my father both, of course. I can tell you something you will understand, though I couldn't tell it to anybody else. They wouldn't understand. They'd think I was wicked to mention it. It's this: my mother didn't love my father much when she married him; I know that, though mother never told me. He was never good enough for mother—I don't mean he was ever bad, you know that, but he was just contented to live here and go to the lodge meetings every Wednesday and be a carpenter and just—just—well, just that kind of a man. But mother was different. I know she was, because I know how I feel, how I am. Mother dreamed, I know, of getting away, of loving some man who would make life full of—of interest and emotion for her. Mother could have loved such a man, too! In her day there was no chance of a girl's getting away except by marriage. You may think it's easier now, but it isn't for most girls. Unless you've been to college or you run away with a theatre troupe,

there is precious little chance of escaping. Oh, the boys have so much the better of it!"

She paused for a moment, and Alec, in silence, watched her flushed face.

"Well, mother had her chance. I know she did. She never told me—not really—but I just know she did. At least, she loved a man, the kind of a man who could have understood her dreams, and taken her with him into a richer life. But something happened—I don't know what—mother never told me, never spoke of it—I've just pieced this all together from unconscious hints—and mother lost him. But, Mr. Alec, *I know that mother loves him yet, whoever and wherever he is.*"

Again she paused, and her big eyes were staring straight ahead with a look almost of horror in them.

The man put out his hand and patted hers, and she turned her face and gave him a tiny, grateful smile.

"Yes," she continued, "mother loves him yet, way down deep in the back of her heart, and once I saw her when she was sewing, and she had dropped her work and was looking hard into a tiny locket I discovered when I was a girl that she kept hidden at the bottom of her Martha Washington table, and there's a picture in it, not of father. She didn't see me looking at her—I was in the next room. *She*

was crying—just softly, to herself. But suddenly father called from downstairs, and I shall never forget the look that came over mother's face! Oh, Mr. Alec, I can't tell you!"

The girl was once more silent, and the Bird House Man was silent, too. His pipe had gone out. But he was the first to speak.

"They say no woman ever quite forgets her first love," said he, "and cynics add that no woman ever marries him. You, I take it, do not want to lose your chance—if there is a chance—for a happiness with Tom Bird richer and fuller than anything Southmead promises for you. Is that it?"

She nodded her head. "I don't want mother's secret in my life," she whispered.

"But there are some things yet to be explained to me," he went on gravely. "How, in the space of ten days, can you be so sure that you really love him? The little birds have whispered to me that you and Bobbie Noble were going to hit it off some day. The world suspects affections too easily transferred. And why should he have left so suddenly?"

He spoke kindly to her, but he spoke with a stern kindness.

"I never loved Bobbie Noble," she answered. "The little birds in this town do a lot of talking. You ought to know that. I've flirted with Bobbie,

I'm free to admit. I've flirted with a lot of boys. People call me a flirt, and I've been one. I like men better than girls, I like to have them admire me. I've let them make love to me—what they call love-making. I've let Bobbie do it more than the others because he was the most decent and—and presumed least—or I thought he did. But I've always known just where I stood, Mr. Alec. I've always known what love, real love, would be like when it came, and not ten days but ten hours would be enough to show me. Mr. Bird came to flirt with me—I knew that. I guess perhaps you told him I was a flirt."

"On my honour, no," said Alec.

"Well, somebody did, anyway. But I didn't flirt with him. I couldn't. He was *real* to me, he was what I'd dreamed of. He made me shy and silent. We went walking down by the river, and he talked of New York, and books, and his tramps, and he didn't flirt with me, either. And then he came again, and again, and—and—we fell in love. I'm sure he fell in love, too! He never said so, but he talked of love, and he told me about his hopes, and how he loved dogs on a hearth by a fire, and he made me feel I was to be in the room he was dreaming about, and my heart got so big I thought he could hear it beating against my side, and his voice was thrilling!"

She abruptly stopped again, and a sudden gush of tears came from her eyes. The Bird House Man passed her his great silk handkerchief when he saw her vainly fumbling for hers.

"But why did Tom leave?" said he gently, when she had ceased weeping.

Marjory resumed her story. "He came last night about eight, I guess, or later. I knew he was coming. But when he arrived, Bobbie was there. I had gone out to the hammock to wait—we'd agreed on it—and father saw me there, and that's how Bobbie knew where I was. He was making a scene—I never knew him to act so. I was trying to get rid of him; but he said we'd been keeping Wednesday nights for each other for a long time, and he refused to go. He said he'd stay around and spoil everybody's evening. He meant it, too. He's awful mulish sometimes. Well, finally he got the idea in his head that he wanted to kiss me, and he said he'd go if I'd let him. Of course, I wouldn't let him—not at first. But then I thought how short a time Mr. Bird would be here, and how much it meant to me—perhaps to both of us—that we should be together; and Bobbie had insisted on sitting in the hammock, and he was fighting so—you know, the way boys do, country boys, anyhow—that finally in desperation I let him kiss me. And—and—of course

that was the moment when Mr. Bird was coming through the shadow over the lawn!"

"Just like a play," said Alec.

"Just like a play," she agreed. "Well, I knew the second I laid eyes on his face that he'd seen. I introduced Bobbie, and then I pushed him out. If I'd been a man, I'd have *kicked* him out! I tried to explain to Mr. Bird, but how can you explain a thing like that, all suddenly? I—I guess I made a mess of it!"

"What did he say?"

"He said something about taking another man's girl, and shook hands good-bye and went out of the yard—and I just stood there and let him go—and that's why you are going to New York with me."

"What time did this happen?" asked Alec.

"About eight-fifteen, I guess. Why?"

"H'm. He didn't come home till nine-thirty."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" cried Marjory, her face growing happy for the first time.

"Yes, it does look hopeful," Alec smiled. "But why the New York trip? Why not write?"

"Write!" she said scornfully. "Would *you* write when you had so much at stake? Would you trust all your happiness to a piece of paper?"

"Not if my looks were so much more eloquent

than language, that's a fact," the man grinned, patting her hand once more. "But what will you say to him?"

"Just what I've said to you—or almost. I'm not afraid to! I'll say, 'Don't give me any answer now. But if you can some time answer me, come back to visit Mr. Alec, and I'll be waiting—without any Bobbie!' Oh, Mr. Alec, there'll never be any more Bobbies!"

"Well, well, Bobbies aren't such a crime, except when you're very young and very much in love," he smiled. "Will your parents consent to your going to New York?"

"That makes no difference," she said simply. "I earn my own living. I make candy for three different women's exchanges. Perhaps you didn't know that? And I do enough housework to pay my board."

"H'm," said the Bird House Man, "I always suspected they were wrong!"

"Who were wrong?"

"The people who called you a goose," he smiled. "When do we start?"

"To-morrow morning!" cried Marjory. "Oh, I'd like to kiss you!"

"Don't," said Alec; "Tom might find out."

The next morning they met at the train with a

studied air of accident, which amused them, and shortly after lunch they were in New York.

"Now, we will ride in a taxi, and I shall pay for it!" she cried. "What hotel are we going to?"

"I think you will go to the Martha Washington," said Alec grimly.

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes! Do you think I want to be branded in Southmead as an abductor? You go there and wait! At five o'clock I'll try to have Tom on hand. It'll depend on you whether we all dine together. I'll return, say, at six-thirty. Has it occurred to you that Tom mayn't be in New York?"

Marjory went white. "Oh, but he *is*, he *is*!" she cried.

"Yes, he is. I telegraphed last evening after you went home," Alec smiled.

Then he went downtown. Alec Farnum downtown in New York was something of an anomaly. He was wearing an uncomfortable stiff collar, to be sure, but he carried his unaccustomed hat in his hand, showing his bronzed forehead, and he stared up at the high buildings with his keen, blue eyes, the eyes of a woodsman, like a boy. They never ceased to fascinate him, those mortared mountains. In the office of Ellman and Bird the door-boy recognized him instantly for a "rube," and took his

own time with the card. But when the card did reach Tom Bird, it brought that young man bounding out of his private office to drag the older man back with him by both hands. They talked a long time, and once when the switchboard operator put somebody on Mr. Bird's wire he ordered her brusquely to say he was out. But when the man with the big shoulders and the grizzled beard and bronzed forehead did emerge again, he was grinning, and Thomas Bird looked like a very happy schoolboy.

At six-thirty Alec called at the Martha Washington. A couple rose from a window-seat in the parlour. The girl was in gray, but she had a bunch of exquisite pink roses on her breast that were no pinker than her cheeks.

"Mr. Bird is going to take us to dinner and to a roof garden," she said, giving Alec's hand a secret squeeze.

They had a merry and magnificent dinner, and at the roof garden the Bird House Man found pleasure enough in the little drama of whisperings and shoulder leanings and accidental hand touchings (which he watched out of a corner of his eye) to make him forget the inanities on the stage. After the show was over they walked through the warm night, across Bryant Park and down the deserted Avenue to the Martha Washington, with Marjory

between the two men, an arm given to each, silent, happy, listening to their talk. At her door she turned and smiled up at both of them. "I've had such a good time!" she said.

"It was a good dinner, but a pretty punk show," Alec replied, with a plaintive note in his voice.

"I'm sorry, but all the good theatres are closed," Tom apologized seriously. "And I'm going to rub it in by coming to visit you again soon, if I may."

"Oh, I suppose you may," said the Bird House Man. "Everybody seems to regard my house as a summer hotel, when it gets too hot in town."

Tom looked surprised. "Well, if——" he began.

But Marjory laughed. "Oh, Mr. Bird—Tom," she cried, "you won't mind if I kiss *him*, will you?"

And before anybody could reply she rose on tiptoe and kissed Alec Farnum. Then she suddenly wept through her laughter, and ran hastily into the hotel.

"There's nothing left for you and me to do, my boy, but to go and get a drink," said Alec.

Quite by accident again, the next afternoon the Bird House Man and Marjory Damon alighted from the same train at Southmead.

"I've got way behind on my bird houses," he complained.

"And I've got twenty pounds of nut bar to make," said she.

He watched her tripping energetically up the street, her bag in one hand, her roses, carefully tied up, in the other, her head poised, erect, happy.

"A little gray goose," he mused. "How little any of us know about the rest of us!"

CHAPTER IV

THE HERMIT

"THE longer I live in Southmead," said Dr. Thomas Trask, "the more I feel as if I were going to step into the last chapter of a novel every time I enter a house."

Alec Farnum stroked his grizzled goatee with his big, powerful hand. "You talk as if we were a public library," said he.

"Public? My Lord, no!" the doctor answered, as he twined one long leg around the other, after his fashion when he was talking earnestly. "If anything could be more private than some of these novels, I don't want to meet up with it. You New Englanders are funny folks—you're as reticent about yourselves as you are outspoken about your neighbours."

The Bird House Man laughed. "Not bad, Tommy," said he. "Almost an epigram. Fill up your pipe and tell me what last chapter you've stumbled into now. Perhaps I can tell you what went before."

The doctor, a tall, thin, youngish man, filled

his pipe from Alec Farnum's jar, and twined his legs together again.

"The sad part of it is," said he, "that it should seem like a last chapter. It ought to be a first or second chapter. Sometimes I feel as if the life story of a woman in one of your New England villages had only two chapters: first, childhood; second, marriage or, more often, spinsterhood—prolonged indefinitely."

"Stop calling it *my* New England," cried Alec. "I had nothing to do with it. Go on with your story."

"Well, in this case, there's one of those last chapters consisting of six hundred pages of ditto marks yet to be put down," said the doctor. "Only I feel sure some strange chapters went before. You know the Weir house up on the flats?"

"Oh," said Alec. "The misty mid-regions of Weir, eh? And have you been giving pills to Margaret Weir?"

"Not pills. She doesn't need pills. What she needs, as far as I can make out, is to forget the first chapters, and especially to forget the endless prospect of ditto marks stretching out ahead of her. She lives there alone, with one old servant, in that strange house—it would give anybody neurasthenia. It's the misty mid-region of Weir, all right! The

other night I could see the mist creeping up from the river. Brrr, it makes me shiver!"

"Has Margaret got neurasthenia?" asked Alec. "I didn't know her father left her money enough for that."

The doctor smiled in spite of himself. "I don't know if I'd call it by that name," he said. "It was stomach trouble when I first called—but purely a nervous disorganization. I've been afraid of something worse."

"So you've been going often?" asked Alec.

"Oh, every now and then," said the young doctor carelessly.

Alec smiled and stroked his beard.

"Margaret is a nice girl," he remarked. "She plays the violin very well."

"Doesn't she!" cried Tommy Trask with enthusiasm. "I've encouraged her to keep that up."

Again Alec smiled. "So you've heard her? I believe the man she was engaged to was also a musician. We never saw him here. She met him in Paris the winter she studied there."

A frown had gathered on the young doctor's brow. "How long ago was it?" he demanded.

"Oh, seven or eight years, I guess. Margaret must be thirty now. Her father died some years ago, and it was before he died that she came home

from Paris with a solitaire on her finger and black on the rest of her."

"Eight years!" the doctor exclaimed. "Eight years wearing black, black, black, nothing but black, in a lonely house full of black walnut, with a black row of Norway spruces all around it, and a garden full of weeds, and the mists of the river creeping up! Why wouldn't she have neurasthenia! I told her so, frankly."

"What did she say?" demanded Alec with aroused curiosity.

"She didn't say anything. She looked at me as if I'd struck her—forgot I was a doctor, I guess—left me suddenly alone in that damnable library of her father's, which looks like a cross between a second-hand bookstore and the morgue. I wish *you'd* see what you can do. People in this town seem to stand for anything from you!"

"No, sir!" roared Alec. "I'll make a sled carriage for Carrie Potter's twins; I'll build a house for Millie Tilton; I'll catch a beau for Ruth—but I'm damned if I'll treat Doctor Trask's neurasthenic females for him! There are limits!"

The doctor smiled even as he frowned. "Well, tell me what her father was like, anyhow," he said.

"Like? Heavens! What *was* he like? I can't describe him. He was more Balzacian than New

Englandish. He always wore an old frock coat rubbed shiny bottle green on the tails, and talked about his poverty when he wasn't spouting Virgil. I've met him out for a walk spouting Virgil many a time, with his pockets bulging with apples he'd picked up under a tree close to the road by raking them to the wall with his cane when the owner wasn't looking. He had been a schoolmaster somewhere in his earlier days, and had written a Latin text-book which was largely used. He was a very learned man—used to write essays on classical subjects for the big bow-wow reviews, and reviewed books by the score for several papers. But a miser, oh, my! In his day that garden around the house was worked. Margaret and her poor mother lived off vegetables. The butcher didn't trouble to turn in at their gate. The only thing he spent any money for was Margaret's music. He had a teacher come here to town once a week, and he made the child practise hours on a stretch. He said if she was going to play she'd got to play well. I suppose you'd call that the artistic conscience in him. I doubt if he had any other kind. When she was twenty-two or thereabouts he let her go to Paris for a winter. She had a relative over there to live with, so it didn't cost him much, but he got tired of paying a house-keeper (Mrs. Weir was dead, killed by work, the

town said), so he made Margaret come back. There were those who declared he'd torn his coat and was too stingy to take it to a tailor, so he made the girl come home from Paris to darn it! A couple of years or so later he died, and left behind him—how it must have hurt him!—the house and considerable money. Nobody but Margaret knows how much, but I notice the butcher goes in there every day. There you have the story."

"I don't know whether I have or not," said Tommy Trask, still frowning. "It doesn't explain a lot of things."

"Well, it's all I can give you," said the Bird House Man kindly. "You'll have to get the rest from the patient."

"It's like getting the answer to her riddle from the Sphinx," said the doctor in a tone that made Alec pause in the operation of cleaning his pipe, and look at his young friend sharply.

"Why are you so interested in Margaret's story?" he demanded. "You're not in love with her by any chance, are you—you long, lean, lank crane, you!"

"I have asked her to marry me," said Thomas Trask.

Alec Farnum nearly dropped his pipe. He looked at the other man a full moment in astonished si-

lence, and then he burst into a roar of laughter. "The crane went wooing a hermit thrush!" he cried. "And she won't have you?"

"I'm afraid it isn't quite so amusing to me," said the doctor.

Alec sobered down. "Don't lose your sense of humour, my boy," said he, "at least, not for a woman. It's a bad sign when people take my laughter seriously. Well, well, don't tell me any more now. I couldn't digest it. You've given me enough to think over. Go home and sleep. We'll get that story read backward yet—yes, and alter the ending, too!"

He smote the doctor mightily on the back, and sent him off down the deserted street of Southmead—it always was deserted when Tommy Trask left the Bird House—with no light in any window save that of the library behind him.

The Bird House Man went back into that library, knocked the ashes from his pipe, blew through the stem into the fireplace, put back the pipe on the mantel, and said slowly, aloud, "Well, I'll be damned!"

People in Southmead were never surprised when Alec Farnum appeared in their backyards with his field glasses slung over his shoulder. He had the

run of the town as much as the birds themselves, and was always as welcome. Probably, too, he preferred that way to call. Hating any sort of formality, he caught people off their guard. The afternoon following his talk with Tommy Trask he might have been seen, or so much of him as appeared above the long, rank meadow grasses and weeds, striding along by the river where it curved and twisted through a swampy region known as the Flats. A mile from the village he turned away from the bank and crossed a piece of pasture full of invading hardhack and thorn trees, and alive with bobolinks, and stepped through a broken fence into what had once been a garden. It was choked now with weeds and rank grass. A grapevine grew in picturesque abandon over a half-fallen trellis. Several hills of rhubarb thrust their great leaves up above the weeds. The currant bushes had not been trimmed in a long while. Alec shook his head sadly. A neglected garden always hurt him. Beyond the garden stood a house, a strange dwelling with one corner rising into a tower as bare and plain as a wooden block-house of Colonial times. The house was painted a mournful brown, and behind it, screening it from the highway, rose a great double row of spired Norway spruces, incredibly melancholy. The only spot of warm colour

in the whole scene was furnished by yellow buttercups growing in the neglected garden, and by a few plants of various sorts close to the door of the dwelling in the single bed which was kept cultivated.

Again Alec shook his head. "Bleak House!" he exclaimed to himself. "What a life for a girl of thirty!"

As he started to walk toward the French door which let out from the hall on this side, he heard sounds coming from within, and paused to listen. Margaret Weir was playing her violin. She was playing something he did not recognize, with a curious, wailing note in it. The sounds came forth from the sad brown dwelling, over the garden of weeds, laden with a luscious beauty—and laden, too, with sadness. The Bird House Man walked slowly up the remnants of a path, and pounded on the door. The playing stopped abruptly.

He heard steps in the hall. The door was opened, slowly and cautiously, and he saw before him a tall woman dressed entirely in black, though the day was warm, with a face oddly like a flower on a slender stalk, but a flower battered and cast down by the rain. She should have been a beautiful woman, Alec reflected. Then, as he continued to look at her, he saw that she still was a beautiful woman. All she needed was a light-green dress to set off her

gold hair and gray eyes, and a smile to illuminate her flower-like face.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Alec!" she was saying. "You gave me such a start."

"If you weren't such a hermit, I wouldn't have," he retorted. "Here you are, singing away to the weeds in your garden, when you ought to be performing at my entertainment to raise funds for the Audubon Society. I've come to ask you why you don't play at that worthy charity, and why you don't trim those currant bushes."

"I—I always refuse to play in public, and I—I—I *hate* the garden!" she answered.

"Well, Margaret, you shouldn't do either," said the Bird House Man, stepping into the dim hall. "And you should get a thirsty old man a cup of tea. Will you?"

"Certainly," she said. "You sit in the library and I'll get it right away."

Alec went into the library. It was a large room, lined to the ceiling with open pine bookstacks painted brown like the house, and filled with musty books, shelf after shelf of calf-bound classics being most prominent. Instead of a fireplace there was an old black Franklin grate thrusting out into the room. On the floor were old-fashioned rag rugs, their colours faded. There was a haircloth sofa, a

worn leather armchair, and a huge black-walnut library desk, on which stood a student's lamp. By the windows was a smaller table bearing a vase of fresh wild flowers—the one bright spot in the room. On a small chair beside it lay Margaret's violin, in its case. Her music was piled two feet high on the big desk.

The man walked over and picked up the instrument, plucking the strings. As the girl came back into the room bearing a tray with tea things on it, he turned toward her. "What a sleeping beauty of music there is in this little box of maple," he said, "only waiting the kiss of the right beau! I guess that's a pretty bad little pun!"

"It is pretty bad," said the girl, with a smile, as she set down the tray on the desk.

Alec saw the smile, and smiled himself. The end justifies the means, he thought, and smiled again. But he was not sure of his ground. He did not know her so well as he wished he did. He had never known her well, for her father, despite his learning, had repelled him, and since the father's death Margaret had lived almost like a hermit. Yet, as he looked at her now, with her odd, flower-like face above the sombre black of her dress, in this strange, dingy old room, and thought of his friend Tommy Trask in love with that face, strug-

gling vainly to win her from her gloomy retreat, to read the closed chapters in her life history which forbade him, Alec was filled with determination. Here was a more interesting human problem than he had guessed.

"What was that you were playing as I came through the garden?" he asked.

"A Russian thing," she answered. "I adapted it myself from a folk song. It somehow fits the view from that window."

"It does!" said Alec, with conviction. "Your fiancé was Russian, wasn't he?"

The girl's cup, he noticed, trembled in her hand. "Yes," she answered in a low tone.

"He was a musician, too?"

"Yes"—still lower—"he—he was studying the 'cello."

"Do you think," said Alec abruptly, "that he would want you to hide your light forever under a bushel? Don't you think you are rather selfish, too, in this life you live? An artist especially has a duty to others—at any rate, a good artist has."

The hand that held the cup trembled so now that she set the cup down on the desk with a little clatter.

"I—I can't play in public," she said. "I—I never could."

Alec ignored this. "There's a tablet down in

the church which you may recall," he said. "It reads, 'In loving memory of Sarah Rollins, for many years a member of this church and a teacher in the Sunday-school.' I used to think that poor Sarah's life history was meagre enough; but you don't even teach in the Sunday-school. Why, Sarah was a riotous agitator and mighty philanthropist compared to you! And you only twenty-nine, with a face like a flower and the gift of God in your fingers!"

"You—you are very brutal," said the girl, averting her face, and evidently near to tears.

"Yes sir-ee, and I meant to be!" the Bird Man exclaimed. "You, only twenty-nine——"

"I'm thirty!" she half whispered, but with surprising vehemence. "I'll be thirty-one in a few months!"

"Thirty! what's that? I'm fifty-four, and making trouble all the time! See here, I want you to play at my Audubon show week after next. Anybody that can play in private as you play, can perform in public. Ruth—you know Ruth Barnes, who just married a young painter named Eliot, fine chap, too—is going to sing. You might at least play an obbligato for her. Come, will you?"

"Oh, I couldn't—I couldn't," she answered. "I never played in public—not since I was little, I mean, and couldn't help it."

"Never?" he asked.

She looked at him in spite of herself, for his kindly eyes were upon her face, and suddenly exclaimed: "It's a lie! I *did* play in public—in Paris—not once, often, night after night—in a café. I shall never forget it! I can see them—the people—the men—staring at me yet! I won't, *I won't*, do it again!"

Alec veiled his surprise by setting down his teacup. "Tell me about it," he said gently. "Did you have to raise money? Wasn't your father sending you enough?"

The girl was sitting on the black haircloth sofa, her black gown almost indistinguishable against it, twisting and untwisting a white handkerchief with nervous fingers. Her hands and the bit of linen were startling distinct. She did not look up, but nodded her head affirmatively.

"That was hard," said the Bird House Man. "But it was, also, a long time ago, in Paris. This is in Southmead, among all your friends."

"Friends!" she cried. "What friends have I?"

"Well," he replied, "there's at least an eccentric old chap who chases birds with field glasses, and a youngish doctor who's much concerned over the state of your stomach——"

Alec saw the slip of handkerchief wrapped suddenly and convulsively about her fingers.

"He—he's been talking to you?" she cried out, like one hurt.

"A little," said Alec. "He wanted to know how to get the hermit out of her solitariness, for solitariness is bad for the nerves, and the nerves are bad for the stomach."

"Stomach!" said Margaret, almost bitterly.

"The stomach is not to be scorned," the man retorted. "A cup of coffee at the right moment, as William James said, can alter a man's whole philosophy of life. Also, it can alter his wife's."

"The trouble with my stomach is, I didn't have meat enough when I was little," Margaret answered. "You can tell Doctor Trask that, if he really wants to know!"

"You are a little unfair to both of us," said the Bird House Man gently. "I don't matter; but Tommy is in love with you, and you ought to think of that."

The woman on the couch raised her eyes to his face and yanked her handkerchief loose. "Don't you believe I think of it?" she cried. "Don't you believe I think of it night and day? Oh, if there were some way—some way—I think I shall go mad!"

"No, you won't go mad," the man answered, leaning forward and taking the wisp of white from

her fingers. He laid it on the seat beside her and patted her hand lightly. "You'll tell me, instead. You remember how, when you were a little girl, you came once and tossed bread to my swans, and fell in the pond, and had to have your clothes dried in my kitchen, and I told you stories? Come, you tell me a story now—your story. That will help, won't it?"

She raised her tortured face to his and met his kindly gaze. For a long moment she hesitated, and then she cried out sharply: "I lied again to you, just now! I didn't play in the café because father didn't send me enough allowance! I played to get money to buy this!"

She held out her hand, where the diamond glistened on the third finger. "This, this, this!" she reiterated, suddenly tearing off the ring and letting it fall on the floor. Then she turned abruptly away, and her head sank down against the couch, as if what she had done had taken all her strength.

Alec Farnum was too astounded at first to make any reply. He saw the ring glistening on the faded rag rug at her feet, he saw her bowed, heaving, black-clad shoulders. An irrelevant song sparrow was singing just outside the window, gayly, full-throated. Somewhere off in the house a big clock was sleepily ticking the seconds. So he let her sob for a long

moment, dry and soundless sobs; and then he touched her shoulder.

"But I do not understand," he said. "You *bought* the ring? Your lover, was he so poor?"

"Poor?" She raised her head. "You don't understand? *There was no lover!* I was never engaged. It was all a lie, a lie, a lie! I've been living a lie for eight years! I've been living a lie till sometimes I almost thought it was the truth. And now it's caught me, caught me in a trap, like a rat, like a prisoner behind bars—for life, life, life! Oh, why did he come?"

Alec moved to her side on the couch, and took her hand. "Margaret," he said firmly, "I am your friend, and Tommy Trask's friend. I want you to fix that firmly in your mind. Then I want you to fix this firmly in your mind: *You are not in a prison.* Nobody is ever in a prison who has the will to escape, and good friends on the outside. Now, you are going to be calm, very calm, and tell me all about it. Begin quite at the beginning. That will be easiest. Tell me everything. Then you'll feel better, and we'll see the way out."

She sat up and clasped his fingers shyly, timidly, like a child unused to kindness.

"It's so hard to tell," she said. "I've never told things. I've never had anybody to tell them to."

"You have now," said Alec. "You will always have now!"

Margaret raised wet eyes to his, and seemed to find comfort. "You remember father," she began, "you knew—everybody knew—how strange he was. But you can't know what my life, and mother's life, was like. I can't tell you. We were afraid of him, I think, and yet he had some power to hold us. He was so full of contradictions! I've seen him weep when I played to him, and then let mother or me shovel coal on the furnace five minutes later. Poor, poor mother! Yet she never seemed to question, and I didn't learn to, either. It just seemed inevitable—we *had* to do what father said. It was our duty, our fate."

"Votes for women!" Alec exclaimed, with a half laugh that hid the savagery of his tone.

The girl did not smile. "Mother died when I was eighteen, you may remember. I *had* to stay then, to keep house for father. He had nobody else, and besides, I thought he was as poor as he said. I did so want to go to college! But father didn't believe in educating women—only men. He wouldn't hear of it. He said if I played the violin that was enough. Then I asked him to let me go somewhere and study to be a concert player, so I could earn money; but he wouldn't let me do that,

either. He—he—oh, he just kept me a prisoner here for three years!

“But that wasn’t the worst. One day he looked at me funnily, and said—I can hear them yet, his words, and feel how they sank down my cold spine!—‘Well, daughter, you are grown up now. We must find a husband for you! Then you can take your poor old father to live with you in comfort.’ I knew, somehow, I can’t tell you how, that he had selected somebody. He had. It was a man in Southmead—never mind who—I won’t tell you—but when father brought him home to dinner that night I thought I should die of rage and shame and—and horror. He—he tried to——”

She paused, with a shiver, and Alec patted her hand in silence.

“I had a flare up, for once,” she went on. “I told father I’d run away before I’d marry that man. I said if he’d let me go away and study for the concert stage, I’d promise to support him, to give him half my earnings. My teacher told him I could probably make a success. He let me go—to Paris. That was eight years ago. Paris! Dear, gay, beautiful Paris! It was all a new world to me. I lived with some distant cousins of mother’s, the Thompsons. Mr. Thompson was French agent for an American sewing machine. I studied hard, oh,

so hard, and I heard operas and concerts and plays. That heaven lasted four months. Then father began to write for me to come back. He said his work wasn't selling well, and he couldn't afford to pay the housekeeper. He talked of my duty to him, said he was sick—oh, you can guess. I—I felt I had to go. I don't know whether I should feel so now. All I thought of then was the fact that he was my father. But I knew what would happen after I got home again, and one day the idea came to me—the idea of the lie! There was a Russian student who had just died. He and I had been to some concerts together. Poor fellow, he had no lungs, and his whole soul was always shining out of his great eyes above his hollow cheeks. He had given me his picture. He had been, even, to my cousins' house to see me. If he had any relatives of his own they were far away in Russia. I wrote to father that I was engaged to him! I told my cousins so, too. I borrowed from another student enough money to buy the ring, and then I played in a café to pay it back. My cousin helped me get my mourning outfit. Nobody ever knew, ever guessed, the truth. When I'd paid the money back I came home—in mourning, with that poor, lying ring on my finger!"

She looked down to the floor, and kicked the diamond farther away from her:

"Well," she went on presently, "father respected my black for a while, and life went on as before. I hadn't progressed far enough to try concert work, even if I could have broken into the field and lived in Southmead at the same time. Besides, every time I thought of my only public appearances, my whole soul was filled with rage and a kind of hatred of life and fate. I wouldn't have played, I believe, if we had been starving. After two or three years, though, father began to talk about marriage again, just by hints at first, and then more and more openly. Finally I began to dread to come down to the table for breakfast. He said I should respect his gray hairs, he said I should be making a home for him, he said I shouldn't let his line perish from the earth—oh, I don't know what he said! Finally he began to reproach me for still wearing black, and he began to invite men to the house again, and made me play, and talked about my cooking, and—and—it was as if I were being offered to them! Sometimes I could have killed them, and killed myself! And, don't you see, all this time, my ring and my black were my only protection? But if any man had come who wasn't—wasn't repellent, who could have taken me away, I'd have gone with him then, I believe. Only there were none like that to come. You know, that kind doesn't stay in South-

mead. They go away to college and never come back."

"Poor child!" said Alec Farnum. "Poor child! This grim old bogey again of our 'duty' to our parents! But now the right man *has* come, hasn't he?"

The woman put her hands before her face. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes! That is the terrible part of it. Perhaps if I'd dropped my mourning after father died, it would be easier now. But I didn't. I'd got used to it. It was still a protection, too. The rumour got about that father had left a lot of money, and these same men came, like vultures, still. I had to show them the door somehow. They don't come now! But mostly I'd got used to it. I—I was broken. I was too old to begin a life of my own then. There wasn't much money, really—not enough to travel with very far, even if I'd wanted to travel. I just wanted to rest awhile, in peace. So I stayed here, and wore my ring and my black, and rested, and pretended it was true—yes, I did. I pretended I'd been in love and had that much of the life that comes to happy women!"

"The sooner you get the silly old New England notion out of your head that a woman who isn't married when she's twenty-five has no love life left, the better off you'll be," said Alec briskly.

"Come, come, Margaret, brace up! What you need is a big dose of modern feminism, *and* a bright green dress, *and* Tommy Trask's society!"

He laughed with his big bass chuckle. But she only raised her eyes to him in wonder, saying: "What do you mean? What life have I now but just to go on?"

"What life have you, you poor, silly female? Why, the merry, carefree, luxurious life of a struggling country general practitioner's helpmate, to be sure!" said the Bird House Man.

Still she regarded him without comprehension. "*But the lie,*" she said. "I couldn't go to him after the lie. He would never forgive me. He is so honest, so direct, so intolerant of weakness, too. He would hate me if he knew, and I couldn't go to him if he *didn't* know."

"I understand exactly how you feel," the man answered gently. "Of course, you would feel that way. If you didn't, I'd be ashamed of you. But just remember this: Tommy fell in love with you before he knew. So now, when you tell him, you can never reproach yourself with the fact that it was pity made him love you."

"What do you mean?" she asked, still groping. "Pity me? He'll hate me, despise me!"

"I guess you don't know Tommy Trask very well

yet," Alec replied. "Do I hate you? Not much! I pity you from the bottom of my heart, and, if you want to know the full truth, I also rather admire you for putting over a pretty clever bluff for eight years! Do you think Tommy won't pity you, too, and just hold out his arms to you? No—he won't—he'll grab you, willy-nilly."

"If—if I tell him, he'll *forgive* me, he won't despise me?" she whispered, incredulous.

"Child, child, there's nothing to forgive, I tell you!" Alec cried. "There's only a state of conscience imposed on the world by Calvinism and convention, to grind one's teeth at. The only thing he, or I, couldn't forgive in you would be the failure of your will to meet this chance. You've taken off that ring, your lie is on the floor there, in the dust. The unforgivable thing in this life is the lack of will to tread down our weaknesses and sins and disasters and mount from them to happiness or a fuller life. Come, tell me to pick up the ring, and pawn it, and give the money to—to—what shall we say? The visiting nurse fund?"

"No," said Margaret. "Give it to the birds, *your* birds, for their protection."

"Thank you," said the Bird House Man. He stooped, picked up the diamond, and dropped it into his pocket. "There!" he cried. "The symbol of

your lie has already gone to brighten the world with bird song and wing flash! Now, one promise more. Will you put on a coloured dress to-morrow, before Tommy comes to see you?"

"I—I haven't got one," she said, "or only old things in a trunk."

"Just as good—he'll never know," said Alec. "Sit up all night and sew 'em into new styles, if you have to. When you get on a green dress you'll tell him easier."

"Tell him!" she gasped. "Oh, I can't do that! No, no, I can't! You—you tell him."

Alec shook his head. "You know better than that," he said. "Don't you?"

"I can't," she whispered.

"Don't you? Don't you know that you must tell him—just what you've told me? That you'll never be happy till you have told him? That life will never be right? That all the joyous future you thought was denied you depends on it?"

"But I dread it so! *Will* he feel the way you say?"

"Never mind how he feels! You owe it to him. He loves you. The only sin you can commit now is the sin of silence. Put that in your conscience and smoke it," Alec cried.

"It's my duty to tell him—yes—I see that now," she said slowly.

"Your duty, put it that way," he answered. "But some joyous day we'll abolish the damn word from the dictionary."

"You shouldn't swear," said Margaret, with the faint hint of a smile.

The Bird House Man clapped his hands merrily on his knees, and rose to his feet, a big, burly figure above the black figure on the couch. "Swear?" he said. "I'm going out now and curse the weeds in your garden till they wither at the roots! But day after to-morrow I return with Ruth to practise that duet—and don't you forget it, either!"

"Day after to-morrow I shall be ready either for the duet or—or death," said Margaret Weir, with a sob in her voice.

Alec took both her ice-cold hands and held them a second. "Nonsense!" said he. "You'll be ready for the dressmaker."

He strode out of the door, and through the garden, waist high in the goldenrod and hardhack and milkweed by the river bank, whistling as he went, and pounded fifteen minutes later on Doctor Trask's door.

"Thomas," said he, "I've read the book, from the first chapter to the present. It's not half through yet!"

The doctor's face sobered, and then grew strangely

joyous as he saw the elation in his friend's countenance.

"Tell me, tell me!" he cried.

"No, you go there to-morrow afternoon and read it for yourself. Mind you, not till to-morrow afternoon! If Mrs. King thinks she's going to die, let her. If all the town takes sick, let 'em perish. You go to Bleak House and read that book. It's a strange, strange story, Tommy, stranger than I knew. You may weep before you come to the present chapter—but the ending is up to you."

He went out abruptly, striding down the street.

The Bird House Man did not see Dr. Thomas Trask the following evening. He called him up, but a voice answered that the doctor had gone out that afternoon and had not returned. Alec Farnum grinned as he hung up the receiver. On the next afternoon he and Ruth Eliot tramped up the road, through the dark spruces, and pounded the knocker on the door of that gloomy dwelling. The ancient maid admitted them. They went into the library. There were four vases of flowers in the room! It was almost ten minutes before Margaret Weir entered, and Ruth stared at her in amazement, for she was wearing a white dress with a bright green ash of ancient pattern at her waist, and a bright

green ribbon at her throat. Her colour was high, her face like a freshened flower on a tall, slender stalk.

"Excuse me for keeping you waiting," she said, "but I was having a dress tried on."

Alec whispered to her while Ruth was unpacking the music.

"You had a supper party in this house last night!" he said. "Highly improper, I call it!"

"I hope it was!" she whispered back. "Oh, dear Mr. Alec, we had so much to say! And after it all we spoke of you, again and again!"

"Nonsense!" said the Bird House Man. "You talked about the last chapter."

"The last chapter? I don't understand."

"Good, you don't need to. Come, Ruth, are you ready?"

Five minutes later Ruth's clear, fresh, girlish soprano was floating out over the weed-tangled garden, buoyed up on the deep-voiced melody of the violin, and the Bird House Man sat on the haircloth sofa and smiled. The aria was from Mozart.

CHAPTER V

THE JACKDAW

ALEC FARNUM was hurrying down the Bush Hill Road in the gathering night of late September. He had been caught by twilight far afield, up at Loon Pond, where he was on the watch for migrating wild duck, and already he was anticipating Mrs. Plumb's rage, for he knew his housekeeper had planned an omelette *soufflé* for supper that evening. He came to a break in the fence presently, and climbed through the bars, taking a short cut over a pasture which would bring him down through Aunt Sally Jane's yard, past her little mouse-gray dwelling with its lean-to roof behind—a relic of the eighteenth century—to the main road into Southmead. He strode rapidly over the uneven ground, finding the track by the woodsman's instinct in his feet. But as he crested the low ridge behind Aunt Sally Jane's dwelling and came into her old orchard (which smelled of ripe apples), he paused suddenly, arrested by the sight of a lantern gleaming on the ground under one of the trees nearest the house, and the little black, bent figure of Aunt

Sally Jane herself beside it, digging laboriously with a huge spade.

Alec stopped still and watched. He wondered if one of her cats were dead, and this were its funeral. "Its name should have been Sir John Moore," he smiled to himself.

But a moment later Aunt Sally Jane stooped and picked up a small box, laid it in the hole carefully, and began to put back the earth. The box was too small to have held anything but a kitten, and Aunt Sally Jane's cats were never kittens. They were always large, old, lazy creatures, who lay purring on an oval rag rug before the kitchen fire. Alec Farnum stepped down quickly through the orchard, and said:

"What ho, avast there, Cap'n Kidd! Are you burying Spanish doubloons in yon chest?"

Aunt Sally Jane dropped the spade with a startled cry, and it knocked over the lantern. "Oh, my Lord! Oh, my Lord! Oh, my Lord!" she cried.

Alec came close and picked up the lantern, which had not gone out, the flame merely smoking up one side of the chimney.

"I didn't mean to scare you, Aunt Sally Jane," said he.

"Well, you mayn't hev meant to, but you done it, jest the same," said she. "Oh, my Lord!"

"There, there," he laughed. "I was taking a short cut home, and it surprised me to find you burying your Spanish gold."

"Spanish fiddlesticks!" said Aunt Sally Jane. "I might ez well tell you what's in thet box. You're the only person I would tell, though. It's my bond."

"Your what?"

"My bond. Land's sake, you ain't forgot, hev you? You bo'ght it for me five year ago, with thet thousand dollars I got fer my north pasture I sold to them summer folks fer their 'cottage.' Cottage! They got ten bedrooms in it an' six bath tubs an' a kitchen range ez big ez a steamboat. Cottage! Little pungkins and sour cucumbers! You told me thet bond wa'n't registered, so's I'd hev to keep it careful. Here's where I keep it. It's all right diggin' it up now fer the October coocon, but sometimes in March the frost ain't out, and it's powerful hard work."

"Why, Aunt Sally Jane, you foolish old thing, you! I told you to keep it at the bank, in a safe deposit box!" Alec laughed.

"Safe deposit box, fiddlesticks!" answered the old lady. "Why would I be payin' five dollars out o' my fifty fer a swaller's nest in a bank thet may be busted open by burglars any time? I don't trust no

banks! A burglar's more likely to be huntin' 'round a bank then he is my backyard, I calc'late."

"Well, maybe there's something in that," Alec laughed. "Here, let me help you finish the job. Why do you do it at night?"

"I don't want'er be seen, do I?" she answered.

"Then why the lantern?"

"I got to see, *myself*, ain't I?"

There was surely no reply to this, and Alec started to pick up the spade, but she took it from him. "I know how ter do this better'n you," she declared.

She finished filling back the earth, then she replaced the square of sod and hammered it down with the flat of the spade. Then, with a rake, she carefully spread over the spot a pile of leaves which Alec had not noticed before. To the casual eye, all traces of the digging were hidden.

"There!" she said, "I calc'late nobody'd guess there wuz a thousand dollars lyin' there waitin' fer spring ter sprout a nice twenty-five-dollar coocon again! Don't you never let on, Alec Farnum! I trust you. Oh, my Lord, ef it hed been anybody else!"

"I'll never let on, hope to die," said Alec, carrying the old lady's spade, rake, and lantern back to her woodshed for her, and handing her gallantly in at her kitchen door.

Then he hurried on down the road to his supper, chuckling to himself, and thinking how much her little black form, as she dug away, resembled a picture he had seen somewhere, long ago, of a jackdaw burying a stolen ring.

It was a whole year later that Alec again came down through Aunt Sally Jane's orchard, but this time it was while the daylight still showed the gathering gold and scarlet on the hills. He had been to see her in the interim, of course, for he made it a point whenever he passed to look in on the little old lady to see if she were in any need. Aunt Sally Jane, living on ancestral acres whence all but she of the old Flint line had fled, was a relic of another generation, almost of another order, and Alec loved her if only for her picturesqueness and for the sense she brought him of other and vanished days. But it was not till the wild duck were once more starting southward that he had occasion to come down through the orchard into the more intimate life of the backyard, where the chickens strolled about and a pot cheese usually hung in a white bag by the kitchen door.

Alec was thinking of the bond as he crested the low ridge behind the orchard, wondering if Aunt Sally Jane had dug it up yet. When he came in sight of the house, however, he was unprepared for

the spectacle which greeted him. Aunt Sally Jane, wrapped in a rusty woollen shawl, with her feet propped up on a low three-legged stool, was sitting in a rocking chair beside the kitchen door, while on a piece of clothes-line stretched from the door to the nearest apple tree, suspended by two clothespins was a sheet of paper which bore unmistakable evidences of that peculiar green engraving characteristic of such commercial art works as bonds and stock certificates. Alec drew near rapidly, reassuring the old lady from afar as to his identity, for he saw her scrambling hastily to her feet.

"Oh, my Lord! it's only you again, Alec!" she cried, in breathless gratitude.

Alec looked closer at the paper on the line. It *was* the bond. "Are you washing your bond to make it more valuable, Aunt Sally Jane?" he asked.

"I ain't washin' it, no; I'm a-dryin' it," she said. "I couldn't leave it flappin' in this wind, with tramps about, too, so I jest plunked down here an' hev been settin' guard, ez yer might say."

"What's the matter with it?" the man asked. "It looks as if it *needed* washing, anyhow."

"What's the matter with it! What's the matter with thet fool Barney Killam, you'd better ask!" she sniffed. "Do you know what thet man done? He come here to rake up my windfalls fer the cider

mill—I get ten cents a bushel fer 'em this year, which yer might say is tainted money, I s'pose, seein's how hard cider's the curse o' this region, but it ain't worryin' me p'raps ez much ez it ought—and what do you think he done? He raked up the whole pile o' them easy-rottin' greenin's plum right over where thet bond wuz buried. 'Course, I couldn't say nothin', or move 'em, so I jest hoped the team would come an' cart 'em off 'fore I needed ter dig up the bond, but they wa'n't in no hurry, fer once, an' them greenin's all *did* rot, or a lot of 'em did, afore the team come, an' when I dug up the bond this noon—yes, I dug it up by daylight this time, 'cause somebody seen me with the lantern last spring, like you did a year ago, only they come in from the road an' I jest had time to go be takin' clothes in—what do you think?"

"I think you ought to have buried it in a tin box," said Alec.

"Well, I calc'late you're right," the old lady went on. "Thet pesky box hed rotted a hole right through the cover, an' the rotten apple juice hed gone down through the ground an' wetted the bond all nasty. Smelled more like cider then it did like a thousand dollars."

Alec felt of it. "It's all dry now," he said, "and I guess it's still good for fifty dollars a year."

"Give it ter me," the old lady demanded. "I'm goin' ter take it in an' iron it now, an' then put it in a new place. You come along. I'll show you. I was goin' to tell you, anyhow. I got somethin' to ask you, somethin' I want you should do fer me, if I were took off sudden."

"Why, Aunt Sally Jane, you'll weep at my funeral," said Alec, "or I hope you'll weep."

"I would fer sure, if I went to it," said she. "You're a good boy, Alec, if you be a little queer, and your father wuz a good man afore yer. But I'm gettin' far on beyond the Scripture span, an' the old man with the scythe may be droppin' down through the orchard any day, an' callin' old Aunt Sally Jane."

She grasped the bond in her thin, aged hand, and entered the kitchen door. Alec followed, bringing her chair and stool. She deposited the precious soiled paper on an ironing board, weighting it with a cold flatiron, and then led the way back into a small shed behind the kitchen, which served as an intermediary storeroom between the house and the woodshed. Here she pointed to an old, battered two-quart milk can, with a wooden stopper, which hung suspended from a nail on a ceiling beam in the corner.

"You see thet can?" she said. "It ain't much

good. It leaks. But in about half an hour it'll be worth one thousand dollars! Nobody but you knows it. I don't want you ter fergit it. Take a good look, an' come back with me."

"But, Aunt Sally Jane, don't do that!" Alec protested. "You'd much better let me keep the bond for you, with power of attorney to collect, or something of the sort. I'd give you a cast-iron receipt. What if your house should burn down?"

"This house ain't burned down since 1764," she answered, "an' it's safer then rotten apples, I guess. Thet bond ain't goin' ter leave my lovin' care while I know it. Not that I don't trust you, Alec Farnum. I calc'late I've shown *thet*."

She licked her finger as she spoke, tested an iron on the stove, which sizzled satisfactorily, and laying a cloth over the bond she began to iron it energetically. Alec watched her in helpless amusement.

"Now, there's somethin' else I want you should do fer me, though," she said. "This bond ain't never to go to none o' my relatives, blood or in-law! I can't very well keep the old farm away from 'em, 'tain't natural-like ter do it, seein' it's belonged to a Flint since the house wuz built in 1764, though it's precious little my nephies an' nieces care about it, or their old aunt, either, fer the matter o' that!"

Here she ironed the last corner of the bond with vicious energy.

“ ‘Course, yer might say this bond was really the farm, too, seein’ ez how it come from sellin’ the north pasture, but it seems different ter me, somehow. Besides, it’s all I got ter give ter Lucy Snow, an’ she’s been better ter me than my own kith an’ kin ever hev, so Lucy is goin’ ter git it, an’ if I die afore I’ve screwed up my courage ter make a will, nobody in the world will know whar the bond is but you, Alec, an’ you’ll go git it an’ give it ter Lucy, an’ tell her whar it come from, an’ how old Aunt Sally Jane Flint’s blessin’ goes along with it.”

“But Aunt Sally Jane——” Alec began.

“Don’t Aunt Sally Jane me—promise!” said the old lady, taking the bond out from under the ironing cloth and inspecting it.

“But you *must* make a will,” Alec urged. “It would be illegal for me to touch the bond. If you want Lucy to have it, you must make a will.”

“Illegal, your grandmother’s great horned spoon!” cried Aunt Sally Jane. “A lot thet would trouble one o’ you men! I guess there’s nothin’ illegal in me givin’ what’s my own whar I please! An’ I won’t make a will—not now. Ef I made a will, I’d jest feel I wuz invitin’ the old reaper right in at the door, an’ I’d lay me down in my bed an’ wait fer

him. I got a kick or two in me yet. 'Sides, I want ter see Lucy Snow ketch the right young man afore I go."

She bustled to a table drawer and brought forth a pair of shears. With these she cut off the October coupon from the bond, put that carefully under a cold flatiron, and beckoning Alec went once more into the shed. There she ordered Alec to take down the battered old milk can. Carefully folding the bond, she put it inside, and pounded back the wooden stopper. Then Alec hung the can once more on its nail.

"Now, thet's the most valuable milk can in Southmead," the old lady chuckled, "an' nobody knows but you and me. Remember, thet bond's fer Lucy Snow. Ef she don't git it, I'll come back an' put a curse on every bird's nest in your garden, Alec Farnum, ez sure ez God made little apples!"

"I believe you would," said he. "Still, you're going to make your will, just the same. Do you want me to get this coupon cashed for you at the bank to-morrow?"

"I do my own bankin', young man," said she, drawing herself up. "Lucy is comin' fer me with her father's hoss an' buggy ter-morrer. It ain't so stylish as an autymobile, but I'm gettin' conservative in my declinin' years."

Alec helped her set her ironing board in the corner, brought her a fresh pail of water from the well, patted her hands affectionately, and departed, smiling as he went.

The next morning he saw her driving past with Lucy Snow, a young farmer's girl of seventeen, with very round pink cheeks, who was invariably singing when you met her on the Bush Hill Road. Alec ran out from his shop and waved to them, and watched them disappear down the street—a girl just entering on life, a woman about to leave it. He had a warm spot in his heart for Lucy Snow.

The winter passed without his seeing very much of Aunt Sally Jane. He was away on lecture tours a considerable part of the time and busy with work while at home. But he found occasion to drop in on her now and then, bringing her little gifts of better tea and coffee than she could have purchased for herself, and at Christmas time presenting her with a pretty gray Angora wool sweater jacket, which Aunt Sally Jane immediately donned and admired like a child.

Lucy Snow was there at the time. "I guess you ain't got nothin' so fine ez this!" said the old lady to her. "But you ain't got no young feller like Alec Farnum comin' 'round ter see yer. I tell you, it pays ter be attractive ter the young men!"

Aunt Sally Jane laughed, and paraded feebly up and down the kitchen. She was growing perceptibly feebler, Alec thought, and he called Lucy outside with him.

"Don't you think she should have somebody with her?" he asked. "I'll gladly pay for a companion if it could be arranged without her knowing it. It isn't right for an old lady like that to be all alone in a house, without even a telephone."

"I know it," said Lucy. "It worries me, too. But I don't believe you could induce her to have anybody. She won't admit she needs it. I come as often as I can. You see, it's only a little way over from our house by the short cut. I've made her a red flag to hang out of the window for a signal if she's sick or anything."

"You're a good girl, Lucy," said the Bird House Man. "There'll be some treasures laid up for you in Heaven! Well, you let me know if anything does happen, and if there's any need for a nurse or a doctor."

Lucy promised, and Alec went his way.

It was in early April that his telephone rang and the startled, tearful voice of Lucy Snow told him to come at once to Aunt Sally Jane's. He had been away the greater part of March, and so busy starting his hotbeds on his return that he had not even

thought to ask about her. Now he set off at once for the old gray house on the hill. It was nearly two miles up there, but he made it in twenty minutes. As he drew near, he saw Dr. Tommy Trask's little runabout standing in the yard. He entered without knocking. Lucy was alone in the kitchen, weeping softly. She looked up as Alec entered, met the inquiry in his eyes, and nodded.

"Dead," she said. "Mother's in there with the doctor. She just came out and told me. When I got here this morning she wasn't up. I ran into her room. She just lay on the bed and didn't speak. But she knew me. She—she kissed my hand!"

Lucy wept again, softly, and Alec went across the kitchen and into the front room of the house which Aunt Sally Jane had used for a chamber. It was a poor, meagre room, but scrupulously neat. On an old yellow wooden bed, under a patchwork quilt, her eyelids folded down as if in sleep, lay Aunt Sally Jane. Mrs. Snow, a buxom, pink-cheeked, motherly female, was combing back her wisps of white hair. The face looked very peaceful.

Alec paused in the doorway, regarding the scene.

"Hello," said the doctor in a low voice. "The last of the old order, Uncle Alec! She died ten minutes ago, without any pain. The works just ran down. Your name was on her lips at the end.

I think she was trying to say something about your not forgetting a promise. But I couldn't be sure. She was already crossing the border."

"How sweet she looks, the dear old thing," said Mrs. Snow. "Now somebody must notify those no good nephews of hers in Brooklyn."

Alec went back to the kitchen. Lucy was excited. "Look," she said, "what I just found—put into an old cake box in the butt'ry!"

She handed Alec a piece of paper. It was carefully dated the day before, and was headed, in a trembling hand, "My last will and testament." Alec read it:

"One:— To my nephews and nieces, John, Thomas, and Abigail Flint, and Alice Flint Pratt, I give and bequeath this house and——"

Then the writing ceased abruptly.

"She—she started to make her will last night," said Lucy. "Do you suppose she got too sick to finish? Oh, why didn't I come back here after supper! I was going to, but—but——"

"But what?" asked Alec, still staring at the piece of paper—a curious paper, one of those old sheets ruled with blue lines, with the dome of the capitol embossed in the upper left-hand corner. He was thinking of Aunt Sally Jane's prophetic words about the old man with the scythe.

Lucy coloured and looked at her feet. "Well, Tom Sawyer wanted me to go for a ride," she stammered.

"Did Aunt Sally Jane know that?" asked Alec quickly.

"Yes. I told her."

"Did she like him?"

"I—I think so," Lucy answered, blushing again.

"H'm," said he. "Poor Aunt Sally Jane! She had a superstition that the reaper would come the night she made her will. A queer coincidence! And she couldn't finish it after all. She couldn't defy her premonition."

When he was unobserved, Alec went into the shed and looked into the milk can. The bond was still there. He put it back hastily.

Three days later one of Aunt Sally Jane's nephews and her married niece and the husband arrived for the funeral. They looked oddly out of place in the old eighteenth-century house, which otherwise was filled with farmer folk from the Bush Hill district, Lucy sitting close to Tom Sawyer, her eyes swollen with weeping. The relatives wore rather exaggeratedly fashionable "store clothes," as Aunt Sally Jane would have called them. They seemed least of any people in the room to belong there. Alec resented their presence. He had taken a violent

dislike to them. He disliked them still more after the body had been followed to the grave, and they returned with him to the old house, where he and the village lawyer whom he had called in delivered to them the unfinished will of their aunt, which was, of course, of no legal value, but showed at least that her intention evidently was for them to inherit the farm, something they would now do automatically.

"What's it worth?" asked the nephew-in-law. "Of course, this old shack isn't worth anything. We might remodel it, Alice, and make a summer place."

"Remodel it! Tear it down, you mean. I guess it would fall down anyhow if you started to remodel it."

"Well, don't you begin to remodel too soon!" cried the nephew to his sister. "You'll please remember that I and Tom and Abigail have a share in this, too! Do you want to buy out our share?"

"See here," Alice exclaimed suddenly. "Didn't Aunt Sally sell part of the farm once? Seems as if she wrote about it to father before he died. Where's the money she got for that?"

"I presume she employed some of it to live on," said Alec Farnum, as quietly as he could. "I would suggest, however, that you make the proper legal arrangements at once for handling the estate, and

institute a search of the house for bank books and other buried treasure."

"A very sensible idea," said the nephew, "and the sooner the better. I've got to get back to little old New York."

Alec went out in the yard presently, to escape their presence, and found Lucy and Tom sitting in the orchard.

"Oh, Mr. Alec," she cried, running to him, "I've been waiting to see you. You know that lovely sweater coat you gave Aunt Sally Jane? She said she wanted me to have it. She made me promise I'd wear it after she was gone. She loved it so, I think because you gave it to her. I—I just can't bear to think of—of that Pratt woman having it!"

"Neither can I, Lucy," the Bird House Man replied. "But it belongs by law to the Pratt woman, nonetheless. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes," said she. "It's in her chamber, in the top drawer of the bureau."

"Go in the front door, on tiptoe——" Alec began. "No!" he interrupted himself gruffly. "That won't do at all. I'll explain the circumstances to the Pratt woman, and leave it to her decency. She must have some. I've always maintained that everybody has, at any rate. Besides, I don't believe the coat is

bright coloured enough for her. She looks more like the strawberry pink kind the summer girls wear."

Tom grinned at this. "Gee, Lucy don't need no bright clo'es ter make *her* look young!" he said, while Lucy blushed.

Alec looked at the pair affectionately. They were so young, so healthy, so simple!

"Tom," he asked suddenly, "do you love Lucy?"

The young man turned fiery red, stammered, and replied, "Y—yes, sir!" with surprising vehemence.

"And you, Lucy?"

Lucy answered by taking Tom's big hand and twining her fingers through his.

"Good," said the Bird House Man. "That would have pleased Aunt Sally Jane."

He strode back through the orchard, pulling at his beard as he went, a frown between his eyes. Outside the shed he paused, and the frown deepened.

"To whom is my duty?" he said to himself, the words actually forming in his brain. "Pshaw, here I am using that abominable word *duty*! By all the laws of the land the bond belongs to those atrocious heirs; by all the laws of right and justice it belongs to Lucy Snow. Am I to be the instrument of the laws of the land, or the laws of—of the Almighty?"

He smiled a little wryly at his predicament, and

put one foot undecidedly on the step of the inner shed.

Aunt Sally Jane's own words came back to him, came back with the fond memory of her quaint figure, her yellowed, shrewd face, her pathos of loneliness. "Remember, thet bond's fer Lucy Snow. Ef she don't git it, I'll come back and put a curse on every bird's nest in your garden, Alec Farnum, ez sure ez God made little apples!"

Do the souls of the dead come back? Would the soul of that little old woman who had known but few to love or to love her, but who had loved those few devotedly, and Lucy most of all, come back to this abode and know that he, Alec Farnum, whom she had trusted, had out of respect for a law in which there was no justice been faithless to her trust? Would she, who had known so little of this world's store of happiness, be unhappy hereafter? Of course, she should have made a will; of course, he had told her so. The premonition was silly, her death a coincidence. Perhaps—who could say? Admit all that, but she was a superstitious old lady, of a naïve, bygone generation, and her premonitions were also her reality. The out tanding fact was that she passionately desired the bond to go to Lucy Snow, and she expected Alec to see that it went to Lucy Snow. The law took no cognizance of wishes now

that she was dead, and the Pratt woman would take no cognizance of wishes, either, where one thousand dollars was concerned: he knew that instinctively.

Was the soul of that bent little old figure whom he had discovered burying her bond, like a jackdaw, under the apple trees, whom he had but just seen lying on her ancient bed with the peace of death on her wizened face, watching him now, made miserable by his failure, mutely miserable without power to protest across the gulf?

In this so busy world Alec Farnum had thought but little about another. The rector said he had no religion—which is often said of those who do not care to be bored on Sunday morning. But at this moment, with one foot on the step to the inner shed, one foot in the chips from the kindling pile, the next world was very real to Alec. He looked into the dimness in front of him with eyes that peered across the border, and he seemed to wait the accusation of Aunt Sally Jane's disembodied voice.

Instead, he heard from behind the closed door to the kitchen the voice of her niece.

"There ain't been an improvement made in this awful old shack for a hundred years," she was saying. "It's funny to think of our folks living like this. My, we might have been born here, if pa

hadn't gone to Brooklyn when he was young! We've come some way in two generations!"

The frown vanished from Alec's brow. "The law be damned!" he muttered.

Then he stole on tiptoe into the next shed, took down the milk can with the utmost care, keeping one eye on the kitchen door, slipped the bond hastily into his inner pocket, hung the can up again, buttoned his coat, and returned, still on tiptoe, to the woodshed.

There he paused, drew a long breath, wiped his brow, and then walked noisily toward the kitchen, opened the door, and entered.

CHAPTER VI

THE WILD DUCK

"OH, UNCLE ALEC, did you know that Tom Eames was back?" cried Ruth Eliot, running into the Bird House Man's shop one summer morning.

"No!" cried the Bird House Man. "When did he arrive, and where's he been?"

"Last night. I met him in front of the post-office, smoking a cigar about six feet long. He's thin and burned brown, and has a funny moustache, and says he's been in China."

"Then he probably has," Alec smiled. "Tom was an honest boy."

"He may have been honest, but he wasn't reliable," said Ruth. "He's the kind of man who—who takes what he wants for his own pleasure or convenience, and then departs without any sense of obligation."

"How do you know so much about Tom Eames?" laughed Alec. "It must have been five years ago that he went away, and you weren't out of pinafores then."

"I was eighteen, you old silly, and I have a wo-

man's intuition! Besides, I know Hazel Bancroft."

"What on earth has Hazel Bancroft got to do with it?" Alec Farnum asked.

"She has a good deal," Ruth answered soberly. "She was eighteen, too, when he went away. I sometimes think a girl of eighteen is older than a boy of twenty-one."

"You mean she was in love with him?"

"I mean he made her be in love with him—he liked having a pretty girl in love with him," said Ruth.

"Most men do," Alec smiled.

"But most men expect to do a little loving in return," Ruth replied.

"H'm—I'm not so sure," said the Bird House Man.

"Yes you are—don't try to be cynical! Tom just went away when he felt like it, and left Hazel flat."

"I can't regard being left flat at eighteen as an unmitigated tragedy," Alec responded. "I can even conceive of it as a blessing. Besides, Hazel seems to have done pretty well since. I don't notice her sitting out many dances. For dancing, indeed, she seems to be a regular grasshopper. Dances pretty well, too! By the way, we must repeat that little performance we gave in my garden

last year, with Hazel doing a butterfly dance in the costume your Rob designed for her, and you hidden out behind the syringa, singing. Now Tommy Trask has rescued Margaret Weir, she can fiddle for us. That's the final touch we need."

But Ruth was not to be put off. "Sometimes you are dreadfully dense, Uncle Alec," she said. "I don't believe you realize at all the sort of a girl Hazel is. She's the kind that never really forgets. Being treated that way—having her heart wrenched—would just change her whole life, down deep. I—I don't know what's going to happen now Tom Eames has come back."

"Perhaps we'll have a performance of 'All's Well That Ends Well,' instead of the dance," said the Bird House Man.

Ruth shook her head. "I don't trust Tom," she said.

"You have a suspicious nature—get out of my shop!" the man laughed. But when she had gone, he idled, looking thoughtfully out across the masses of colour in his garden.

It was not long after that Tom Eames himself appeared—a young man of twenty-six, with a lean, bronzed face (it was more than mere tan), and a smiling, easy manner not without a certain suggestion of swagger. He came into the shop with this

swagger rather accentuated. Evidently he regarded his return as of considerable importance. Alec looked up from his work, put out his hand, shook Tom's, and then resumed his occupation.

"Nice morning," he said. "I'm glad for the sake of the team. Last week it rained for the game with Boxford."

Tom Eames was undoubtedly taken aback by this greeting. "Y-yes," he stammered. "Who's on the team now?"

"Never mind the team now!" Alec laughed. "Tell me where you've been these five years—only don't try to impress me, because I've been around the world myself. I've heard the clarinos sing in the Mexican ranges, and the nightingales by the Danube."

"You've not changed much," said Tom, with a sheepish grin.

"I'm too old to change. What have *you* learned in your travels?"

"I've been to China," said Tom. "After dad died, and left me enough to see the world with, I just lit out, as you know. I went through Europe and the Suez Canal, and India, and got to Canton before I'd used up my pile. It got pretty low there, though, and I joined up with a plant expedition into far western China. Was two years with that—it

was heaps of fun, and hard work, too. Then I got on a newspaper at Manila, and worked there six months or more, and then I went to Japan for a bit, with an importing firm. Then I got homesick and headed for 'Frisco, and got stuck at Honolulu for nearly a year, working on a pineapple plantation, for a man I met on the steamer. Learned a lot about pineapples and saved up a bit of money, and here I am!"

"Going to stay?" Alec asked impassively.

"Sure. I'm tired of kicking around the world. I'm twenty-six now—getting old! Guess I've seen my share. I'm going to look around for the right farm, buy it in, and start a nursery—going to breed native wild flowers and shrubs for the market. I've decided that our own native flowers are pretty good. 'Course, I'll handle a few China plants, to use my advertising drag, seeing as how I've been to China myself."

"That's a fine idea, Tom!" cried Alec. "You didn't find anything in China lovelier than a fringed gentian, did you?"

"No," said the youth. "No, I didn't. Well, I must be on my way. When I get the farm, I can rely on your help, can't I? You'll be about the only person in this old berg who won't think I've gone dippy."

"To the limit," said the Bird House Man.

Alec watched him go whistling out, and on the street resume his swagger as he met a passerby.

"Travel is one way of not getting an education," the Bird House Man muttered to himself.

In the next few days the town was full of rumours of Tom Eames' search for a farm. He was boarding at Carrie Ashton's, and received callers every day, to consider their offers. It was reported that he had come back home worth fifty thousand dollars, which gradually swelled to half a million. His swagger grew in direct proportion to this increase in the size of his fortune. But, after a week or more he hadn't bought a farm. He said he couldn't find one yet which answered his needs.

But he had begun to be seen again with Hazel Bancroft. He took her to a dance, where she taught him the new steps which had come in since his departure. Ruth reported to the Bird House Man that he and Hazel danced twelve out of fourteen dances together, which in Bentford was always considered a serious sign. He went often to her house. Gradually he began to stay there for most of his dinners. After dinner he and Hazel walked out along the river bank or drifted down under the willows in a canoe. The other young men who had been devoted to Hazel dropped away. Southmead ac-

knowledgeed the rights of priority in such matters. It was a recognized thing that Tom Eames had come back to his old home—and his old sweetheart.

“If I were Hazel, I wouldn’t have taken him back so easily,” said Ruth.

“Oh, yes, you would,” Alec smiled. “He was only a boy, after all, when he went away to see the world. He’s come back a man.”

“He’s come back just what he went away—only more so!” Ruth retorted. “Rob thinks so, too.”

“Well, of course, if Rob thinks so, that settles it.”

“Why doesn’t he give her a ring, and let her announce their engagement, if he’s grown up? And why doesn’t he really start that nursery he’s talking about?”

The Bird House Man put up his hands. “Don’t ask me!” he cried. “You talk as if I were to blame.”

“Oh, nobody’s to blame, I suppose,” Ruth answered. “But this time he’ll break Hazel’s heart.”

It wasn’t long after when Tom Eames again appeared at the Bird House, this time rather late in the evening. Alec Farnum was smoking a bedtime pipe. Rob Eliot and Ruth had just gone. They had been singing and playing for him, and Rob, shy as a schoolboy, had whispered a secret in his ear. He had kissed Ruth good-night, and chuckled at her blushes when she guessed his reason, and now he

was smoking happily, thinking of his song sparrow, of the girl who was as dear to him as the daughter he had never had.

Tom's knock aroused him.

He looked at his caller sharply, as he made him welcome.

"It's rather late to be dropping in, but I saw a light in your window," said Tom apologetically.

"Late? Don't you remember that I'm an owl? Well, Tom, have you found the right farm yet?"

The young man shook his head. "That's what I've come to talk to you about," he answered. "You can understand, if anybody in this old berg can. I don't want to buy a farm any more. That's the flat truth."

Alec looked at him sharply again. "What do you want to do?" he asked.

"I want to go back into China."

The older man took the stem out of his pipe and blew it clean before he answered. "You mean to say that you have an attack of wanderlust, after you've been home only a month, eh?"

"That's about it, I guess."

"Why China?"

"I couldn't explain that to anybody who'd not been into the interior—but once you've been there, it calls you. The miles and miles of country with-

out a town and without a forest—just little house and garden after little house and garden! The yellow people! The great yellow rivers! The *oldness* of it! And then, finally, the white mountains on the far horizon, and the wildness where they say all history began, and the dirty monks and—and—oh, I can't tell you, but I dream of it, and it kind of says, 'Come!'"

Alec slowly nodded his head.

"Something like that calls to the wild duck on a day in autumn, I suppose," he said. "Why did you come home at all?"

"Well, gee, a fellow gets homesick! I wanted to see the folks—white folks."

"And have them see you, eh?"

"What do you mean?" asked Tom.

"Well, you rather wanted us back here to know you'd been globe-trotting, didn't you?"

Tom Eames was not angry. He laughed. "I'm afraid you're a bit right," he answered. "A chap does want his home folks to know what he's up to."

"I don't believe the wild duck does that," said Alec shortly. "What about Hazel?"

Tom grew grave. "That's what I really want to ask you about," said he. "There's nobody else I can ask, and besides, Hazel sets great store by you."

I know you think I'm a bit of a rotter, and Ruth—what's her name now, Eliot?—thinks I'm more'n that. But, honest to God, Mr. Farnum, I'm fond of Hazel, awful fond—I guess as fond as I can be of anybody. I want to do what's right by her."

"Why not marry her then, and take her to China with you?"

"You wouldn't say that if you knew interior China. Besides, it ain't China alone—it's this cursed longing in me to knock around the world. I got some money now—a couple of thousand dollars. That ain't going to last long. I may get a good job when it's gone. I may have to punch steers in Argentine or heave tea bales with a gang of coolies, 'somewhere east of Suez.' Can't ask a woman to share that, you know."

"If Hazel loves you——"

"Oh, she loves me all right!" said Tom.

The Bird House Man smothered an instinctive exclamation of anger, and continued: "If Hazel loves you, has it occurred to you that perhaps you owe it to her happiness to settle down here, or at least in some civilized land where you *can* take her and support her?"

"That's just it!" Tom cried. "Sure it's occurred to me. I tell you I'm not such a rotter as you all think. I want to be on the square with Hazel.

But I've been trying for two weeks to make myself ask her to set a day, and always, before I can do it, up hops a vision of China, or I hear a little geisha that I—I knew once, singing in her funny voice, and this old berg seems all of a sudden tame, and Hazel looks—oh, how can I explain it?—sort of homely, no, not homely, of course—sort of uninteresting, and—and I just *can't* do it. If I do ask her, what's going to prevent my feeling this way afterward? Won't I make her more unhappy later? Gee, what shall I do?"

"So you've come here to get me to make up your mind for you, eh?" snorted Alec Farnum. "Well, Hazel is about seven thousand times too good for you, that's my belief. You can't help what you are, though. You're a wild duck with an enlarged ego. You are planning already to fly away. Have you booked yet?"

"I—I sort of half reserved passage on a Pacific mail next month, from Vancouver," Tom admitted, caught off his guard.

"Oh, you did? Well, use it, by all means. I guess we can mend Hazel's heart better now than later."

"I—I hate to do it," said Tom. "I hate to think of Hazel with any other man."

Alec Farnum rose. "Good-night," he said, so brusquely that the youth started. "Before you go,

leave me the name of your steamer, though. I wish to know it."

His manner precluded further speech, and Tom Eames went out, rather abashed and hastily.

The next day he left town, to all but Alec as unexpectedly as he had come. It was Kib Turner, driver of the local "deepot carriage," who told the Bird House Man. Alec was in front of his shop, edging the path to the curb, when Kib drove by.

"Took that young feller Tom Eames to the deepot this mornin'," he said. "Reckon some few farmers who was lookin' ter sting him is kinder smartin' themselves neow. I arst him whar he was goin', an' he allowed he was migratin' like a wild duck. I told him ter look out fer decoys. I ain't never travelled much myself, not ez you'd really say, though I bin ter Washington. I calc'late it makes yer kind o' restless."

"Sometimes," Alec answered, so briefly and almost curtly that the old fellow on the battered hack looked surprised, and clucked instinctively to his dejected horse.

That evening the doorbell of the Bird House was once more pulled, and Mrs. Plumb admitted a girl. Alec rose to greet her without a word, his eyes searching her face anxiously. It was a pretty face, an extraordinarily pretty face, a little thin and

pointed, and set on an equally pretty throat. Her figure was youthful and slim, and she carried herself with unconscious grace, though all her movements were alert and rapid, comporting with the vividness of her dark-blue eyes. Those eyes were now looking into Alec's with a snap of challenge.

He put out his hand and took hers. "Sit down, Hazel," he said gently, leading her to a big easy chair.

She sat down, and folded one trim ankle over the other. "So you sent Tom away!" she began abruptly.

"Was that what Tom said?"

"He said you advised him to go."

"I won't deny it," the man answered, "though I think it's only fair to tell you that he had already booked his passage before he came to me. Did he tell you that?"

The girl shook her head.

"No, he wouldn't," Alec said, half to himself. "Hazel, I advised him to go because if it wasn't now, it would be later, because he's not good enough for you——"

"Don't you think I might be permitted to be the judge of that?" she said, so quietly that Alec shot another look at her face.

"Presumably you are," he replied. "But, unfortunately, my judgment also was asked, and I

rendered it. I'd rather see you unhappy and free, than unhappy and bound."

"Unhappy!" she shot the word out. "Unhappy! I suppose everybody thinks I'm at home now, crying my eyes out! Well, I'm not, and I never shall be! If I *do* cry my eyes out, nobody in *this* town will ever know it! Oh, you men! If you feel like seeing the world, why, you just go see it, no matter who suffers!"

"Not all of us, Hazel," said Alec Farnum gently. "Not all of us. But there are some men who are born wanderers, who, when the call comes, have to rise and follow, like a wild duck from his northern marshes. It is better to let them go, and find another mate among the——"

"Mate! I don't want any mate!" the girl broke out passionately. "I—I cared for Tom five years ago, more than I ever can or want to care for anybody again. I—I thought he had come back to me. I took him back. I knew what he was as well as you do. I—I hadn't many delusions after those five years. But it seemed as if my early dream was somehow coming true after all, and—and——"

She stopped abruptly, and fidgeted with her wisp of a handkerchief in her fingers. Alec said nothing. He hoped that she would weep, but she was quite dry eyed.

"Now he's gone," she resumed, "and I'll never take him back, not if he crawls to me over fields of splintered glass! But don't you think I'm going to stay here and look pathetic and wait for some 'nice' man to heal my broken heart! *I've* come to you for a little advice, too. You said Tom was a wild duck, and advised him to fly away. Well, what's sauce for the drake is sauce for the other sex, too. Have you got any reason why *I* shouldn't fly away? Just because I wear petticoats, can't I see the world when I want to, just as well as he? Do you suppose a girl doesn't hear any of those calls you talk about?"

Her eyes were challenging him, and Alec waited a moment before he responded.

"I can think of several reasons why you shouldn't fly away," he said presently, "but I'm not sure that you are any more ready to listen to them than Tom was."

"I'll listen," she said.

"Well, for one thing, you *do* wear petticoats—metaphorically speaking, at least; I can't vouch for the present styles. What is easy for a man is difficult and dangerous for a girl. In the second place, you are not that kind of a person."

"It's little you know what kind of a person I am!" she retorted. "I didn't know myself till to-day. I'm only just finding out now. I may not

'hear the East a-callin',' as *he* was always quoting, but I do hear something calling which bids me get out of Southmead. I'm not going to wait for the world to come to my door, in the form of one man who talks through his nose, like everybody here. I'm going to go to the world, and see it all! I'm going to leave my 'broken heart' behind. I'm not going to take *any* heart with me. *I'm* going to do a little wild ducking!"

"You're not going to do anything of the kind!" Alec answered. "You are going to stay here and go about your business as usual, and think of your father and mother and sister."

"My business! Perhaps you'll tell me what my business is? Waiting for a *man*, I suppose, and singing in the Episcopal choir, and helping wash dishes! Not much! The choir won't be any worse if I leave it—it couldn't—and father can afford to hire a maid if I go. Besides, you don't really believe that a child owes it to its parents to sacrifice its life to them, now do you?"

"No," the man admitted, "not when it knows what its life should be, and doesn't merely chase a whim."

"Call it what you please, it says 'Come'—it's my equivalent for China," she retorted. "I demand as my right an equivalent for China!"

"What do you purpose to do?" the Bird House Man asked.

"You've told me I can dance," she said. "In fact, you and Ruth and Mr. Eliot have taught me to dance, really. Perhaps I shall dance my way to fame—who knows?"

"Oh, child, child, you don't know what you are saying!" Alec exclaimed.

The girl rose, and looked him soberly in the face. "Uncle Alec," she answered, "I know exactly what I am saying. I've never been far out of this village more than twice in my life, but I'm a woman now. I know exactly what I'm saying."

Their eyes met, and the man shook his head. "No, you can't!" he half whispered. "No, no! you wouldn't leave us all, this way—me—it'll be my fault. I'll—I'll wire Tom!"

"If you dare!" she cried. "I never want to lay eyes on him again!"

And suddenly, before the man had time even to put out his arm, she reeled against him, and lay sobbing on his bosom.

He let her sob for a time, stroking her pretty hair like a father, and then, when she was quiet, he searched for his cap to take her home. But she refused his escort.

"No!" she cried. "I'm not going to be escorted

around by a man, just because it's dark! I shall find my own way now—I insist!”

“As you like,” he answered. “To-morrow afternoon I'm coming to take you for a buggy ride, though.”

She smiled faintly back into his face, but without replying ran quickly out and down the steps.

“With a white horse, too,” he called after her.

True to his promise, Alec reached her house the next afternoon, seated in a buggy pulled by a white horse. Her mother answered the bell. Alec saw at once that she was greatly perturbed.

“Hazel—Hazel's gone to New York on a little visit,” she said.

“Come out on the porch, Mary,” said the Bird House Man, who had gone to school with Hazel's mother. “Now, tell me about it. She's gone away, has she? Did she leave any address?”

The woman was close to tears. “No,” she answered. “That's the most terrible part of it to me. Her father'll forgive her in time, but I don't know where she is! She said she'd write. But how do I know what'll happen to her down in that city?”

“Hazel will look out for herself, never fear. Did she have any money?”

“She got two hundred dollars of her own out of the savings bank this morning. It's money her grand-

father left to her. Her father wouldn't give her any. She wouldn't tell him why she was going or for how long. They had a terrible scene. It's all that Tom Eames' doing. I'd like to lay my hands on him!"

"Didn't Hazel explain anything to you?"

"Not that I could understand," the mother half sobbed. "She said she wouldn't face the pity of this village—I could understand that, and so could her father. But she wouldn't go off for a visit to her cousins' in Malden. They'd have had her, and glad. She said she was going to see the world herself, and in her own way, and she talked something crazy-sounding about wild ducks. It was awful!"

"I think *I* understand," said Alec. "She was at my house last night. I never thought she'd really go away, though. I'm sure she'll write to you soon. You let me have her address as soon as you get it, and I'll go right down to New York."

The man went home and walked in his garden, back and forth up the paths, stopping now and then to pull up a weed. "I could go after her now," he thought. "Doubtless I could find her. Will any harm come to her if I don't? Will it be better to let her have a fling at this thing, the world, and find out what it is? Will the learning hurt her—or will it do her good?"

It was a problem that he debated long, sure that

whichever way he acted he would be sorry. At last he made up his mind. "She has character," he told himself. "Character, and two hundred dollars. With those two assets she can last for a while. After all, she's a right to her own life, without any of us tagging along to 'save' her! If she doesn't find out for herself, nothing will ever persuade her. It's better so."

He went back to his shop, took off his coat, and set to work at the bench.

Mrs. Bancroft received a postal from Hazel the following day, announcing simply her safe arrival in New York. Almost every day thereafter messages came, on picture postcards, but no address. The mother brought them all to Alec. They comforted her a little, but she wanted to write. Her grief was pathetic. "If I could only write to her and tell her that her father isn't so angry now!" she said. "I know he'd send her some money pretty soon, if he only knew where to send it, and ask her to come home. And her kitten—she must want to hear about that!"

"Hazel doesn't want you to know, because she's afraid you'll follow her," said Alec. "That's natural. She'll send you an address as soon as she finds work; you'll see. She wants to be settled first, so she'll have an anchor out against your tugging."

Two weeks later she did send an address, as the man had predicted, announcing that she was settled there—"and earning my living," she added. "Don't worry about me, and tell Uncle Alec I am happy and am going to be happier."

Alec took this address, and departed for New York. He knew that the mother would have no peace till he had done so. It was the number of a house on a cross street west of the Avenue, above Times Square, a street of small millinery shops, cleansers' agencies, and brownstone dwellings down at the heel. The man knew before he pushed the bell what sort of an establishment he had reached. He was not surprised when the dirty servant told him Miss Bancroft wasn't at home, and he'd better try the the-ayter.

"Which theatre?" he asked.

The servant retired and bawled a question into the darkness at the rear of the hall.

The answer came audibly back, and he departed. He waited till evening, and bought a seat, not too near the front. The play was a musical comedy of the conventional type. Hazel was not on the stage at the start, but he had not long to wait for a glimpse of her. She came on with another girl, to attend the comedian in his opening song, with a dance. The two girls wore black and white Pierrette bodices, with skirts that did not reach their knees, and each had

on one white and one black stocking, with slippers reversed in shade. Alec Farnum felt an instinctive hot revulsion, but he watched the dance, and had to admit to himself that Hazel danced well. So the audience thought, for the two girls at once became favourites. They went off presently, and when they next appeared, to support the tenor in a "military" number, they wore white silk tights, with scarlet short coats covered with gold cord and little white and gold helmets. He took one look at Hazel, her slender, graceful legs revealed to her very hips, one look at her face which was smiling at the audience, and went hot with shame and anger. His impulse was to rush down the aisle and snatch her away. He heard a comment from a man in the seat beside him, and clenched his fist. The two girls had begun to dance, a silly sort of goose-step affair. The audience, a blurred sea of faces, were intent on the spectacle. Alec got up and almost ran out of the theatre.

Outside, he paced up and down in the glare of Broadway. "I'm a fool," he told himself, "I'm an old-fashioned fool. But if I were her father, how would I feel? The same way—the same way! All those thoughts beating up upon her from the Yahoos in the audience! It shan't be! It can't be!"

He began looking for a telegraph office, and sent a long message to Tom Eames, whose ship was due to sail from Vancouver in two days. Then he went to his hotel and wrote to Hazel's mother. Hazel, he said, had a good engagement dancing in a first-class theatre. He had not yet been able to persuade her to return home, but he had hopes. Perhaps it would be better to wait a little in patience. They would have to, anyway.

He took his own advice, too. He did not attempt to see her. He waited for a message from Tom. If the youth didn't rise to the occasion—well, Alec didn't know what he should do. But he had that much faith in Tom. It might be the thing needed to make a man of him, Alec thought. It might be a case of "All's well that ends well," after all.

Tom wired that he was coming. Five days later he arrived. His conscience had been working on the trip. He was a soberer person than he was a month before. Alec sent a message to the girl's boarding-house.

"Tom Eames and I are coming to take you home from the theatre to-night," he wrote. "Tom has something he wants to say to you, and you must hear it."

Then he took Tom to the performance. He watched his companion's face sharply at Hazel's

first entrance, and saw it go white and then red. When she again came on in the white tights, Tom uttered a low, inarticulate gasp, and stared first at the girl and then at the faces of the audience, and then back at the girl. He sat glumly in his seat during the intermission, his chin sunk on his breast, and Alec left him to his thoughts. In the second act Hazel again appeared, but this time in a totally different costume—a sort of Watteau shepherdess affair, which floated out above her pretty feet and ankles crossed with black ribbons, and she and her partner did a dance by themselves which, in this garish show, was like a sudden thrush song amid a babel of crows. The audience responded to it, as audiences always will respond to effective art, especially to Hazel's share, for she could unconsciously be felt as the favourite. There was the unmistakable air of freshness and unsophistication about her, and she so evidently danced because she loved it.

Alec Farnum sat straighter in his seat as he saw her executing steps which she had trod on his garden lawn, and felt the contagion of her dancing catch the house. A dim doubt began to stir in him. He resented, somehow, Tom's mutter, half inarticulate, "She seems to be enjoying herself!" He vaguely wished that he had stayed through the entire per-

formance that first night, at any rate. After all, the child was an artist—she was getting her effect!

They went to the stage door after the play was out, and waited a long time for Hazel. Finally she came, a cloak about her, her colour high on her cheeks; she put her hand quickly and impulsively in Alec's, and barely nodded to Tom.

"I only came because you asked me to," she whispered to the Bird House Man, and the three of them walked in constrained silence out to Broadway.

"Come, we are all hungry," Alec cried, as cheerfully as possible. "Let's go to a nice, quiet place and eat, if there is such a thing in New York."

He hailed a cab and drove to a hotel on the Avenue, where the dining-room was less than a quarter full at this time of night, and there was no cabaret. Hazel slipped off her cloak, and Tom, looking at her with eyes that seemed to behold a stranger, saw that she had on a dress quite without sleeves, and cut décolleté.

She drew a large pink scarf about her neck and shoulders as the maid took her coat, quickly shrouding her upper person in a kind of filmy cloud, and followed the two men into the dining-room.

Alec gave an order, and then looked from one to the other.

"Well, Hazel," he said, "here is Tom back, and here are you turned wild duck! It's rather quaint when you come to think of it."

Hazel, who had not spoken a word to her lover since she first greeted him, now looked him squarely in the eyes.

"What I want to know," she said, "is *why* Tom came back."

Alec started to speak, but Hazel raised her hand. "Please!" she said, "from Tom."

The scarf had fallen away a little from her right shoulder at her gesture, and lay around her upper arm, so that the shoulder was quite bare save for the inch-wide strap of the dress. She saw Tom's eyes upon it, and deliberately drew the scarf back in place, not taking her eyes from his face. Finally he let his own eyes meet hers.

"Well, I'll not try to bluff it," he answered. "Mr. Farnum wired me just as I was about to sail, and told me what—what you were doing, and—and that it was my fault."

"I thought so," she said.

"But honestly, Hazel, I've been thinking all across the continent what a piker I've been, and what a fool. I guess there's nothing in China or anywhere else as good as you! I—I'm different now, I swear to God I am! I want to take you

away from here. I'll get a job anywhere you say. I'll—I'll marry you to-morrow! You can't stay where you are, on that stage, dressed that way!"

"Why don't you say undressed—that's what you mean," Hazel answered quietly.

"Yes, that's just what I mean!" cried Tom hotly.

The girl smiled, as if to herself, and turned toward the Bird House Man. "And you think so, too, Uncle Alec, do you?" she asked. "A month ago you sent Tom away because it was better for me not to marry him, and now, just because I'm wearing tights, it's better for me *to* marry him. It's better to be unhappy than undressed, is that it?"

Alec grinned at her phrasing in spite of the gravity of the situation. "You put it somewhat bluntly," he said.

"I've come to the point where I want to put things the way they *are*," Hazel replied. "We never did in Southmead. We never do, we New Englanders. I want to get at the real reason why you sent for Tom, and—and inflicted this interview on me."

"Here comes the food," said Alec, "we'll feel better now."

There was a diversion of silence while the waiter served them.

"And now?" said the girl. "I can't believe you're such a conventional old Puritan, Uncle Alec."

The Bird House Man put out his hand along the table and laid it on hers. "I'm very fond of you, Hazel," he said. "I acted on an impulse. I came to New York to see you, because your mother was suffering so, and when I *did* see you, in your second costume, I fled the theatre and wired to Tom. I'm a man who has lived a good many years in a world full of men and women, and I know some things which praise God you don't. I couldn't bear it, that was all. I have no daughters of my own. Ruth has been my daughter, and I don't know how many more, including a little person with fairy feet who came when you called Hazel. Do you think a father would want to see his child stood up that way in the public gaze? Do you think he'd want to have her in that atmosphere of—of managers' offices and Broadway show girls? Do you think he wouldn't dream for her, rather, the normal home, the normal happiness? Tom, I believe, now——"

Hazel interrupted him. "Never mind Tom," she said. "Let's tackle that word normal first. If most of the world danced instead of watching dancers dancing would be normal, wouldn't it? Normal things are for normal people. *Somebody's* got to be abnormal to keep life interesting, I guess. If I like to dance, to appear in public, to be a part of all that life behind the scenes—which is a pleasant change

from Southmead, I assure you!—I don't see why you should worry about me, Uncle Alec. It isn't like you to preach a normal, conventional life to somebody who can find more—more—more satisfaction in another sort."

"There is some truth in that," Alec replied. He bit his lip thoughtfully. "Come, I'll be brutal, too," he added. "What hurts me is to see you—stared at."

Hazel again interrupted him by withdrawing her hand. "What you mean," she said, in a deadly quiet voice, "is that the men in the theatre look at me the way Tom looked at me when my scarf slipped from my shoulders. Is that it?"

Alec was too startled to reply. The girl let the scarf slide down to her elbows, deliberately, showing her white bosom and shoulders and all of her arms above her pink, sleeveless bodice.

"I'm shocking you, Uncle Alec," she continued, in the same level voice. "But I'm telling the real truth. Don't fancy for a minute that any girl with an ounce of brains doesn't know how some men look at her. I've watched Tom since we came into this dining-room. I wouldn't marry him now—not for—for—oh, he wants me *now*, because I'm not dressed like Southmead but Broadway! Bah!"

She drew the scarf up close about her bosom with a convulsive movement, and shivered.

"That isn't so!" Tom blurted out. "I don't deny I never saw you so pretty, Hazel. I never knew you were so pretty. I can't help looking at you, because I love you. Yes, I do, I love you! I can't bear to think of you upon that stage, with everybody staring at you, any more than Mr. Farnum could. I guess that's the way every chap would feel who loves a girl. You ain't fair. Is she, Mr. Farnum?"

"No, Tom, I don't think she is, not wholly fair," the Bird House Man answered slowly. "Perhaps we are not wholly fair, either."

"Oh, that has occurred to you, has it?" cried the girl. "I'm glad of that! Perhaps you think it was *easy* to put on tights for the first time, and parade before a dirty little stage manager as if you were a heifer at the cattle show, and then to go out into the awful glare of those footlights, with all the faces beyond them!"

Hazel's voice broke, and for an instant she lost control of herself. But the tears did not come. She forced them back, and went on rapidly: "Why do you suppose I did it? Why do you suppose I begged, almost on my knees, for a chance to show the stage manager that I could dance? It was for the



“I can’t help looking at you, because I love you. Yes, I do, I love you!”

chance *really* to dance. Do you know who suggested our costumes in the second act? *I* did. We didn't get that dance till almost the last rehearsal, and then only because something else didn't pan out. And you, Uncle Alec, didn't stay to see it before you telegraphed to Tom! Do you think I'm wearing tights because I *like* it? It's a way up—the only way—that's all. People like my dancing. The manager is going to have me take lessons. I love to dance. I *can* dance. It's a beautiful art. It's an art as much as—as anything else. I'm not going to break my heart for you, nor anybody else, Tom Eames. Neither are you going to spoil my life. I've found what I can do, and I'm going to do it! And I won't have you talking as if everybody on the stage was a—a bad woman!”

She paused, breathless, and Alec looked at her keenly. “Yes, you can dance,” he said. “You can dance very beautifully. Will you never be homesick?”

“How do I know?” she answered. “Perhaps I shall be, the way Tom was, and come back to Southmead to show myself.” She spoke bitterly. “The tights would make quite a hit at a church social, wouldn't they?” she added.

She began to draw on her long gloves. “I'm very tired, Uncle Alec, I wish you'd take me home,”

she said, beginning to rise. The dining-room was by now deserted save for a sleepy waiter or two in a far corner.

"Oh, but I must see you again!" Tom cried. "I can't, I won't let you go like this! Hazel, dearie, I want you now more than I ever thought I could want anything. On my word of honour, I'll never leave you again!"

"You'll never see me again, Tom," she answered quietly, "unless you pay for a ticket at the box office. I can't prevent that. You chose your life once—I've chosen mine now. I prefer dancing to domesticity. I can hear the applause of the audience, and it calls to me, as China called to you. Good-bye, Tom. I don't need to be angry at you any more."

She put out her hand as they reached the ante-room by the cloak racks. Her eyes were sparkling strangely. She let the scarf slide once more from her shoulders as she made ready to put on her wrap.

Alec turned away to let them say their good-byes alone. He looked for the cloak girl, who had disappeared, but he could not help hearing Tom say, in a low, passionate voice: "Hazel, I want you! For God's sake, kiss me once, for old time's sake. Remember all our kisses that were so sweet!"

He heard Hazel give a low, odd laugh, that some-

how made him shiver, before she called sharply: "Uncle Alec, please help me with my wrap."

He turned and saw Tom's glum, hungry, tortured face, and caught a strange glint in the girl's eyes as she was snatching her cloak away from her lover. Without another word she walked out and entered a cab. Alec took his seat beside her. She did not look back to see Tom standing in the doorway.

They rattled on a block or two in silence, and then suddenly Hazel said: "You'll tell mother I'm all right, won't you, and I'll come to see her as soon as the show closes, and—and please kiss my kitten for me. If—if I'd never loved him so I shouldn't be here, should I? I shouldn't be really doing something in the world. I—I'm going to be famous. I got notices in all the papers! I'll succeed, won't I?"

Alec patted her hand. "Not a doubt of it," he said.

"It's—it's better so, isn't it? You really believe it's better, don't you? I—I tortured him at the end. I *meant* to. I was wicked. Oh, I wish I didn't have any sex! Sometimes it's terrible, it's horrible! I hate myself and the whole world! I'm just going to dance, and dance, and create beauty and be famous! Oh, how I'm going to work!"

"Some day," the man began softly. "Some day——"

But she put her hand over his lips. "You're a dear old sentimentalist," she said, "and if you don't come to see me every time you come to New York, and if you don't come to New York very often, I shall never forgive you. May I give you the kiss I didn't give Tom? Oh, I think you understand, really, down deep. You can never make mother understand, though. I—I wish I had my kitten here."

In the dark cab she kissed him, and he felt her cheek wet as it brushed his own.

Then the shoddy old brownstone swallowed her from his view. He dismissed the cab, and walked through deserted, echoing cross-streets to his hotel, vaguely aware of a pale star overhead, and the sleeping myriads in the miles of houses, all with their dreams, their passions, their ambitions—and life seemed to him very difficult.

"I'm a stupid old meddler," he said aloud. "All I've succeeded in doing is to make an artist out of a little country chit!"

But in his secret heart he was rather glad.

CHAPTER VII

THE MEADOW LARKS

THE Bird House Man, walking in the river meadows as the afternoon shadows were lengthening and the willows were turning a dusky silver in the low light, focussed his field glasses on a distant spot on the river bank, and then smiled. He put the glasses back in their case and walked quietly in that direction. As he drew near, a meadow lark was singing in a tall elm—a reedlike, piercingly sweet song tossed out on the afternoon breeze. The couple on the bank, whose backs were turned, did not hear him approaching. They sat close together, lover-like, their shoulders touching, their voices low.

Alec suddenly imitated the song of the lark directly behind them, and with a startled exclamation they looked around, the girl snatching her hand from her lover's clasp.

"Oh, it's you!" she said, her face flushed with the surprise of being discovered.

"Yes, it's I," Alec laughed, "and I don't want to hear any reproaches, either. If you choose to sit in the open meadows, with your backs to the uni-

verse, thinking you are in a world apart just because you happen to feel that nobody else counts—why, you must expect to be caught at it.”

“Oh, I don’t mind *you* catching us!” the girl laughed, blushing still rosier, and slipped her hand back into the boy’s.

“Now you are trying to make me jealous,” Alec replied, “so just to spite you I’m going to sit right down here myself, and make a crowd.”

The boy couldn’t help looking a little glum, though he tried hard not to, but the girl laughed happily again. “I’m glad you’ve come,” she said. “Jack has been telling me what he’s going to do.”

“He has!” cried the Bird House Man. “Well, that’s more than he’s told me yet. As soon as he gets through college, he comes running to you, and never looks me up at all. I can’t imagine why.”

“I was coming to see you soon,” Jack Cooper answered solemnly. “Honestly, I was. But—but—I hadn’t seen Alma since Christmas vacation. She couldn’t get to my Class Day, you know, ’cause her mother was sick.”

Alec winked at Alma. “Well, maybe I’ll forgive you,” he replied, “though I can’t really understand your choice. Now let me also hear what you’re going to do with your life, as the baccalaureate sermonizers say. I had a hard enough job persuad-

ing your dad to let you go to college—you've got to have some pretty big plans to pay me back!"

"Oh, he has wonderful plans!" cried Alma, her eyes resting fondly on her lover's face. "He's going to make you proud of him, Uncle Alec!"

"He has already, by his choice of a helper," the man answered.

It was Alma's turn to grow sober. "Oh, I'll try so hard!" she said. "But I'm so—so unfitted. I've never been educated the way Jack has. I—I don't know why he hasn't forgotten me for some smarter girl somewhere. I—I shouldn't blame you, Jack."

Alec saw her eyes still on her lover's, and tears were very close to them. He turned away. "Jack," he said, "I see a loose-strife on the bank which I'm going to pick."

He returned with the flower a moment or two later. "Now, let's hear the plans," he said.

"Well, I don't know whether you can call 'em plans, exactly," Jack began. "Of course, they are kind of vague yet, all except what I'm going to do right away."

"And that is?" said the man.

"Well, I'm going on the New York *Tribune* the first of September."

"Fine! How did you land it?"

"I did correspondent work in college—football

games, and stuff like that, and they said they'd give me a job on the regular staff after I graduated. Guess they try out a bunch of college men every year or so, maybe. 'Course, I don't know if I'll make good——"

Alma gave his hand a little protesting squeeze, and their eyes met for a second.

"If I do make good," he added, as if her look had changed his line of thought, "Alma and I are going to announce our engagement."

"Well, well," Alec cried, "that *will* be a surprise to everybody! Do hurry up and make good. I want to see the consternation among all Alma's other beaux."

The girl laughed softly through her blushes. "Silly," she said, "you know I never had any beau but Jack. Nobody but Jack would love a stupid little mouse like me."

It was the boy's turn to protest. He did it by laying his fingers quickly over her lips.

They both fell silent, looking at each other, and Alec waited, a smile on his face.

"Now tell Uncle Alec your *real* plans!" Alma said, suddenly realizing the silence.

The boy looked a trifle uncomfortable. "Oh, he'll think I'm foolish, I guess."

"Probably," Alec answered, "but try me, anyhow."

"Well, I'm—I'm not going to be a newspaper man always. I'm—I'm going to *write!*"

"Don't newspaper men write?"

"You know what I mean—I mean *really* write—stories, essays, books, and—and things."

"He means *poems*," said Alma.

"Poems, eh?" Alec exclaimed. "That's fine! I didn't know you were a poet."

"He's written some beautiful poems to me!" the girl said.

"Oh, those were nothing," the boy cut in.

"Nothing! I like that! Why, Jack——"

"I mean, dear, they weren't half so good as I shall do some day," he added quickly. "They were just undergraduate verse."

"They were very beautiful," Alma maintained stoutly.

"Of course they were," the Bird House Man interjected. "Don't you believe what Jack says about 'em. Artists are never good critics of their own work. When did you first feel this power, Jack?"

The boy looked at him sharply, as if he detected a certain laughter in the man's words, but Alec's face was beaming with kindly interest.

"Well," he said. "I never was much for poetry till I took a course in English lit. The stuff we had to learn in Southmead High School used to bore me.

But all of a sudden, in the 'Golden Treasury' I began to find things that sort of made me choke up, and I got to liking poetry better and better, till along one rainy afternoon, when I'd—I'd—well, I guess I'd been thinking of Alma all day, and wishing I was home seeing her, I got to reading Shelley in the college library, and I just read and read till it was dinner-time, and I went back after dinner and read till closing time. Then the next day I got to going in Keats—gee, the 'Eve of St. Agnes' is some poem!—and I followed it up with a lot of Wordsworth. And after that I just moved around in poetry most of the time. Then, one day, I was so full up with it that I just had to get out and take a long walk. I hiked up to a hill above Lexington, and I was standing there while the sun was setting over the rolling fields and meadows, and in the west a great Himalayan range of cumuli was piled up, and the sun dropped down behind the peaks and turned 'em all gold and pink and salmon, and it seemed as though I could climb to the top and look over into a wonderful Promised Land, and—and find Alma there, waiting; and I just felt as if it was my job in life to write poetry that would make people realize how beautiful the old world is, and how full of love and longing! I—I felt as if I'd had a call, the way ministers do, I guess."

Jack paused, out of breath.

"Hope you don't think I'm foolish," he added, with an embarrassed laugh.

The girl had reached over and taken his hand again. Alec was gazing out at the slow current of the river below their feet.

"By how many names it is known!" he said softly, as if to himself. "It is the Divine Unrest, it is the Blue Flower of Romance, it is the Gleam. It is Youth and Love. Jack, may you ever steer your bark for the land beyond the sunset, and the baths of all the western stars! Think you foolish? It is we who are foolish, we old fellows under the shade of the prison house, we who see in the sunset only a signal for supper. Follow the Gleam, boy, follow the Gleam!"

"I'm going to!" Jack replied, his eyes sparkling once more with enthusiasm. He was looking away from Alma now, out across the meadows. She gazed into his face, and seemed to realize that his thoughts were not upon her. "I'm going on a newspaper to earn money, and to see life. Of course, a fellow can't make a living just writing, at first. And a fellow can't write till he's seen life. I'm going to write *American* poetry—not Longfellow stuff, but real American poetry of our day and our new conditions. The world is different now. Our whole

economic structure is different, and we've got to have a new, a different poetry to give men a beauty and a faith that meets their needs. That's going to be my task!"

His eyes were transfixed as with a vision. The girl once more laid her hand on his, but timidly this time. Alec watched them both a moment in silence, and then he rose.

"Jack," he said, "come to see me soon, and bring some of your work. Let's thrash it over together. I used to write poetry, too, once on a time. If Alma only loved *me*, I might again, by Jinks!"

The girl turned her face up to him softly. "I do love you, Uncle Alec," she said. "You know it."

He shook his head most mournfully, and gestured to the surrounding meadows.

"A cloudless sky, where Jack and I
Are twenty-two forever,"

he paraphrased. "That's how *you* feel. I feel 'chilly and grown old.' Good-bye, my children, and God bless you for a pair of meadow larks whispering secrets to the river as it runs."

He moved away quickly. Turning once, a long way off, he saw the lovers still sitting on the bank. Beyond them, on the river bend, the willows were a

smoky blue now, and in the west a great cumulus lay like Mount Everest against the sunset, and from its peak one might gaze into the ultimate Thibet of the ideal. He raised his glasses, and looked at the pair half hidden by the river shrubs. But he took the glasses quickly down, and laughed a soft, deep, tender chuckle.

Out on the road he met Dr. Tommy Trask striding along on his lank legs.

"Whoa, Tommy!" he cried, blocking his path. "Did you ever have a Keatsy feeling?"

"A *what*?" said the astonished doctor. "I don't believe I ever heard of that. Is it due to a germ?"

"Alas, if it only were!" sighed Alec. "I'd start a culture right away. Tommy, you are an excellent man of science. Go home and kiss your wife."

He left the astonished doctor gaping after him, and went whistling on toward the Bird House. That evening he took down his Keats, spanked the dust off, and read in it for a long while, finally closing the volume with a sigh.

"Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird," he quoted aloud, lingering on the long-drawn cadence. Then he rose, and put the book back on the shelf. "Our hermit thrush sings a far lovelier song than the nightingale," he added. "Once I dreamed

of making *him* immortal with an ode! Go to bed, you old fool."

Some days later Jack brought what he described as a "batch of masterpieces" to the Bird House, and he and Alec read them, discussed them, fought about them, hurling quotations at each other, and babbling about octets and sestets and trochees and dactyls and *vers libre*, till poor Alma, who sat silently in a corner, was quite bewildered. The next afternoon she came softly into the shop where Alec was working, and stood twisting her handkerchief.

"Uncle Alec," she finally said, "will—will you lend me some of those books you and Jack were talking about?"

The man's keen gray eyes bent kindly upon her. "What do you want 'em for, young lady?" he asked.

"You—you know," she replied. "I want them to read, so I'll not be so terribly ignorant of what Jack is doing, and—and—and such a drag on him."

"No, I won't lend 'em to you for any such purpose!" he cried, bringing down his hammer with tremendous force on an unsuspecting nail.

"You—you *won't*?"

"No, marm! Not when you talk that way! You can have 'em to get pleasure and profit out of; you can have 'em to equip yourself better to pick Jack's efforts to pieces. He's not half such a good

poet as he thinks he is, you know—or, rather, you don't know, because you're in love with him. But don't you ever say in my presence again that you're a drag on him. If Jack's a poet at all, it's because of you. Every man owes what sensitiveness of soul he may possess to his first love. So no more of that talk, young lady!"

Alec laid down his tools, and led the way into his garden, where he picked a dozen sprays of his choicest sweet peas—Wedgwoods and Earl Spencers—and fixed them on the bosom of Alma's plain white frock. Then he laughed, and ushered her into the house.

They sat a long time together, looking at books, while he told her what to read. When she left, her colour was high with excitement, and under her arm she carried four green Globe editions, the little blue "Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics," and a critical history of English literature. Alec watched her trudging down the street with her load, and chuckled to himself.

Alma came every week after that for her "lesson," as she called it; and every week she grew graver at the magnitude of the task before her.

"There is so much to learn!" she said one day, her low, smooth forehead puckered with a frown. "I never knew how much. Oh, what a joke our silly high school is! Don't tell Jack I'm trying, will you?"

I know I shall never succeed. All I manage to do is to feel myself growing older and older with the great mountain of knowledge still ahead."

Alec laughed. "That mountain is still ahead of all of us," he said. "All we can hope to win is some little foothill crag from which we can see the valley of our ignorance behind, and the real contours of some of the range ahead. Call it a vantage point of taste, if you like. Most people don't get that far, even in art. They still like motion pictures."

The frown deepened on Alma's brow. "I—I want to learn about newspapers, now," she said. "That's Jack's immediate problem, isn't it? How can I learn about newspapers?"

"Whew!" said Alec. "Now you've set me a poser. What I don't know about newspapers would get out the whole Sunday edition. I guess you have to learn about them by being on 'em. It's an awful idea! I once heard an editor say, though, that the only indispensable man on his force was the telephone switch girl."

"Votes for women," Alma laughed. "But you see I don't even know how to run a switchboard."

"I hardly think the knowledge essential to marital happiness," Alec replied. "Better stick to Keats."

"But I want to understand all Jack does," she said.

"That's more than he'll do himself, for a while," Alec laughed.

It was a week later, in August, when Alma once more came to the Bird House. Her face was drawn and white. It was evident that she had been weeping and that she was still suffering miserably. Alec Farnum took one look at her, cried "Hello! what's the matter, child?" and led her into a shady nook in the garden.

"Jack," she said, "he's—he's gone away!"

"Gone away? What on earth do you mean? I saw him this morning at the post-office."

"He's gone away. He—he got a letter from some girl, and he's gone to see her."

"Gone where to see her?"

"I don't know—some beach place—Watch Hill, I guess. She—she's from the West. He says he met her last winter in Boston. He never told me about her before. She just wrote and said that she was at Watch Hill, and he packed right up and went!"

Alma's white face was pathetically miserable, and the man looked at her pityingly.

"The young scalawag," he cried, "to make you unhappy this way! He ought to have lied about it."

Alma looked at the man with great, surprised eyes. "Why, Uncle Alec, what do you mean? I never

heard you say anything like that before!" she exclaimed.

"I mean just what I say," he replied. "When a young fellow of twenty-two, with a temperament, develops a momentary Mormon impulse, he oughtn't to let the girl he loves know anything about it. That may sound immoral, but it's very sensible."

"No, no, no! that would be terrible! A girl would *always* find out, and she could never forgive being deceived, though she might forgive the—the other. I'm *glad* Jack told me where he was going."

"You are, eh? Just what did he tell you?"

"He told me he met this girl in Boston—she was studying there. He said they had a lot of ideas in common, especially about poetry. They wrote some poetry together, or something, I guess. Anyhow, she made him promise that if she came East this summer he'd come to see her."

"*She* made him promise, eh?" said Alec, with a chuckle. "Our young Shelley is like all of the breed. Didn't he assure you that he didn't really care anything about her—not *that* way?"

Alma nodded affirmatively, not trusting to speech.

"Well, the joke of it is that he really doesn't—the young idiot."

"He's not an idiot!" cried the girl. She was very close to tears now. "It's I who am the idiot. I'm

just ignorant. When he meets somebody who can really talk poetry and things with him, he leaves me. I—he—it isn't right for me to try to keep him."

"Nonsense, likewise piffle, not to mention rubbish!" cried the man. "I know your Jack better than you do, because I was Jack once. All Jacks, at a certain age, have a superficial susceptibility to the allurements of anything in petticoats. The prettier the object in petticoats is, the more Jack thinks he's swapping intellectual and spiritual ideas—the more he 'has in common.' It's something he has to get over, like the mumps. Your Jack loves you just as much as he ever did, and he can't understand why you can't understand that he does."

Alma shook her head. "I certainly can't understand it," she said. "Do you think I'd go away like this, to see another man, only two or three weeks before Jack and I had to separate? I guess not!"

"Of course you wouldn't, my dear girl. You are a grown woman, and Jack is a temperamental boy who thinks he's seeing life for the good of his art, when he's really working off his Mormon tendencies before he settles down to manhood. What you want to do is to spank him good and proper when he returns."

"I shan't be here when he returns," she said very quietly. "I'm going away to visit in Boston. I

—I won't see him when he comes back for anything —I *couldn't*. I—I—I won't stand in his light. If he has more in common with somebody else than with me, he can have her. He—he *ought* to have her," she added bravely.

Alec looked at her a moment in silence. "That's a good idea," he said presently, with a tender smile. "You go away, and see what Jack does when he gets back."

"Oh, I'm going, soon," she said. "I—I don't *care* what Jack does when he gets back. "May—may I take some of the poetry books with me? I'll be awfully careful of them."

"You may, the whole library," Alec replied. "When is Jack coming back?"

"I—I don't know. If he came back right away it wouldn't be so bad. But he said, just as if it wasn't almost killing me, 'I'll only be gone a week or so'—a *week* or so, and we parting at the end of this month! Oh, how could he—how could he?"

Her tears could no longer be restrained, and she buried her face in her hands and sobbed. It was a long time before Alec led her out of the garden.

When Jack returned a week later she had gone. He tore around to the Bird House.

"What does Alma mean?" he cried. "Here I get home and find a note from her saying she's

gone away for the rest of the summer, and she never wrote to me once while I was at Watch Hill, and she says you know why she went. Is she jealous, or what? Why are girls so silly? I *told* her I didn't care anything about Elsie Barnes, not *that* way. I'd promised to go see her if she came East, *promised* to—like a house party, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Alec gravely. "But you should be careful how you make rash promises."

"But it wasn't a rash promise. Good Lord, a fellow can have *friends*, can't he, girl friends, I mean?"

"Not always with safety, at certain times of life, not when it means wrenching the heart strings of the girl who really loves him," said Alec.

"Good gracious, didn't Alma believe me? Does she think that——"

"I think those are questions you'd better ask Alma," the man interrupted. "All I know is that poor Alma believes you like the other girl better because she's had more education in poetry, and so Alma thinks it's her duty to give you up, for your own good."

The man was looking at his young friend keenly, and Jack grew red.

"Oh, it's preposterous!" he cried. "Why, I never loved anybody but Alma! I—I liked Elsie.

She and I had a lot of fun doing sonnets together. She—she interested me. A fellow's got to know all kinds of people. A fellow's got to see life. But I never *loved* her. Where is Alma? I'll go find her right off."

"I think she's somewhere in Boston."

"Boston, whew! And I used up 'most all the money I had getting to Watch Hill and back! Oh, gee, what shall I do?"

"That is an economic problem," the man smiled. "The older you grow, the more you realize that an economic problem is at the bottom of everything. How much do you need?"

"I—I couldn't take it from you."

"No, because I wouldn't give it to you. But I'll lend it. Will fifteen dollars be enough?"

"Sure."

Alec gravely handed over the money, and then wrote an I. O. U. which the boy signed.

"Now you can pay me out of your munificent salary, as soon as you get to work," said Alec. "You're lucky I don't charge you interest. Run along and find Alma's address from her mother, and go bring her home. No more co-educational sonnets on the way, either!"

Two days later Jack was back, and Alma with him. They came all the way from Boston together,

on the train, and Millie Tilton, hearing about it, ran into the garden of the Bird House to tell Alec.

"It's scandalous, I think," she said. "In *our* day young men and girls were not allowed to do such things."

"In *our* day, Millie?" Alec laughed. "Why, this is *my* day—I don't know about you. I consider the present always mine. Try it—you'll find it saves you a lot of fret."

"Well, if you think it's all right for——" Miss Millie began.

"I think they probably had a fine time," Alec interrupted. "There wasn't a soul to bother 'em for six mortal hours, and they probably played honeymoon."

Miss Millie retired, convinced of the uselessness of argument, and late the same evening Jack appeared at the Bird House.

He was very sober. He came into Alec's study, filled his pipe, and stared at his feet thoughtfully. The man let him stare, and waited.

"I—I guess I'm older than when I went away," he said presently.

"Yes? I guessed as much, too," the man said kindly. "But you brought Alma back, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes! And she'll never have another such

occasion to go away. Do you know what I found her doing?"

"No, what did you find her doing?"

"She was staying at a cousin's in Newton, and had got a job as telephone operator!"

"A telephone operator? Why that?"

"Well, she wouldn't tell me at first, but finally she did. It was because you said to her a switch-board girl in a newspaper office learned a lot about newspaper work, and she was fitting herself to apply for a job on a Boston newspaper."

Alec drew in his breath in a long whistle. "You have to be careful what you tell a woman!" he exclaimed. "They're so apt to believe you."

"Yes," Jack went on, "she was really planning to stay in Boston and work on a newspaper *that* way. And just because she thought that maybe some day I might get tired of the other girl, and come back to her, and then she could help me better in my work! Why, when I got the confession out of her, I—I—I just blubbered like a kid. I—I guess I'm not worth that kind of love."

"I guess you're not. None of us polygamous male bipeds is," said Alec. "Still, you're the best she has to give such love to, and now you've got it I advise you to keep it as the most precious possession you'll ever have."

"Oh, I will, I will!" the boy exclaimed. "It's—it's made me feel older and—and sort of grown up, though. I never knew folks' feelings could be so—so deep. Why, she never even *reproached* me. When I came to her and she believed finally that I loved her, and only her, she just said, 'That's all right, Jack,' and—and cried."

Alec smiled softly to himself. "There's more than one way to learn about life, isn't there?" he said.

"I guess there is," Jack answered. "I guess *this* was the real thing!"

"Will you tell me something, and not think I'm an impertinent old meddler?" the man continued.

"Ask it."

"Did you play honeymoon on the way home in the train?"

Jack blushed like a schoolboy, and nodded his head. "We—we pretended we were on our wedding trip," he answered. "Gee, but I'm going to work hard, and pull off that trip really, as soon as I can! I never knew how much I loved Alma till—till this. Is—is it wrong to want her so, you—you know what I mean?"

"It is very right and good," the man answered gravely, "if you don't forget there is another side to love. Never forget that Alma wants to know about the things you do. Talk poetry with her. Keep

her in all phases of your life. Have everything in common with her—that was the phrase, I believe?”

The boy coloured. “Don’t rub it in,” he said. “Well, good-night, Uncle Alec. I’m going home now to write a sonnet. Gee, I’ve got a corking idea for one! The last line’s been singing in my head ever since we got on the train to come home. It’s this:

“Forgiveness came like daybreak on her face!

I’m going to work all night on it!”

The man walked with him to the door and patted his shoulder affectionately. Then he went back to his study, and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

“To sit up all night for a sonnet!” he mused. “Oh, youth, youth!”

Then he went to bed.

The next afternoon, walking again in the river meadows, he saw from afar two figures on the bank, and put up his glasses. Two heads were bent over a sheet of paper. The boy’s lips were moving. The girl had her two arms clasped around his elbow, and her cheek brushed his shoulder. Once, for a second, Alec thought he saw her lips caress his sleeve.

The man put down his glasses and turned off in the opposite direction. Over his head, in a great vast elm, high aloft, a meadow lark was singing toward the west, a piercingly sweet melody.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHICKADEE

MISS MILLIE TILTON, closely followed by Siegfried, her dachshund, came past the path to her own door, and turned up the path to Alec Farnum's shop, where the Bird House Man was at work.

"Have you heard the news?" she said.

"No, but I expect to," he smiled.

Miss Millie made a little face at him. Then the solemnity of her announcement overcame her again, and she said in a duly subdued voice, "Mrs. Roberts is dead."

Alec laid down his plane. "Well, well," he replied. "Clara can have a life of her own now!"

"Why, Alec Farnum, what a heartless, wicked thing to say!" cried the little spinster.

"Nonsense, Millie," said he. "You know as well as I do that Mrs. Roberts was a mollusc of the worst type——"

"A what?"

"A mollusc. No, I suppose you never saw that play. Well, a woman who just stuck to one piece of rock and played helpless, and so got waited on till

the day of her death. She was no more an invalid than you or I, in my not-too-humble opinion. I don't suppose Dr. Tommy Trask would express his—in public, anyhow. And poor Clara just gave up her life to that woman—gave up her life and her lover, too.”

“But what else could she do?” demanded Miss Millie. “She was all her mother had.”

“Let her mother cook her own dinners or die of starvation!” said Alec, giving a nail a sudden terrific whack which caused Siegfried and Miss Millie both to jump.

“Oh, Alec, why do you talk so?” the woman demanded. “You know you don't mean it.”

“Mean it? Well, it's only half what I mean, to be sure! Millie, if I should say all I mean, you'd die of shock right there in my doorway and poor Bologna would be without a parent's tender care. You know perfectly well that Clara Roberts is twenty-eight years old and unwed, because her mother wouldn't move from Southmead when Don Barker wanted to marry the poor girl, and Clara, with the abominable conscience of you New England women, couldn't leave her behind. Can't you hear the old lady weeping and telling Clara how she'd *die* if she was left alone?”

“Well, it's my belief that Don Barker didn't try

so *very* hard to induce her to come away with him and Clara," said Miss Millie.

"My God, can you blame him?" cried Alec.

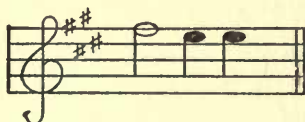
Miss Millie drew herself up. "If you are going to curse, it is time I went," said she.

"Yes, you go right along to Clara's house, and tell her I'm here to do anything I can if she needs me," he smiled. "I'll be up there presently myself."

All Southmead agreed that Clara didn't seem to take her mother's death as hard as some girls would have done, but then, as all Southmead said in extenuation, Clara was such a cheery little body that you could never tell how she really was taking a thing, anyhow. A week after the funeral the Bird House Man saw her hurrying along the street in front of his shop, with a basket on her arm, and she actually appeared to be singing under her breath. She was just the type that is perfectly described by the old Yankee phrase, "a cheery little body." She was a trifle below the normal height, and a trifle above the normal weight—"a plump and pleasing person." Once, as a young girl, she must have been unusually pretty, and she was attractive still, but her type seems to settle down sooner than others into a comfortable acceptance of maturity. She had large, round, merry brown eyes, and an infectious

laugh. Her chief avocation during the life of her mother (who supplied vocation enough for anybody) was the instruction of new mothers in the care of their offspring. She had a passion for babies, and since Southmead had not yet reached a point of progressiveness where a visiting nurse was considered a necessity, Clara Roberts found plenty to do. She went trotting about in all weathers, cheerful and helpful, ministering in the trail of Dr. Tommy Trask.

Alec Farnum called to her out of the door of his shop, by whistling the chickadees' love song:



She stopped, and looked up.

"So you recognize the call?" he said.

"No, but I do the caller," she answered. "What was it?"

"That's the chickadees' call," he said. "You are a chickadee sort of person, you know, always brave and cheerful and friendly—and pleasantly rotund."

"At least I thank you for the 'pleasantly,'" she laughed.

"What have you got in that basket?" he asked. "May I see?"

"Oh, I'd love to show you!" She ran up the path

and put the basket down on a bench beside a half-finished martin house, quickly lifting the lid. Inside was a collection of baby clothes, which she took out one by one, and held them up for Alec's inspection—two little dresses, a cap, and socks which Alec said looked like thumb protectors.

"Aren't they sweet?" she fairly chirped. "They're for Minnie O'Brien's little baby, which I hope won't be a boy, because he'll probably drink and break her heart."

"Probably," Alec answered. "Minnie has no right to have babies under the circumstances."

"Oh, no right?"

"Never mind that now," the man said quickly. "We won't talk eugenics. Did you make all these since——"

"Since mother died?" she helped him. "Yes, every one. You see, there was so little to do in the house after mother went that I just *had* to do something to fill up the hole. I—I—don't know what would become of me if I should just sit down and fold my hands."

"I suppose not," said Alec, shaking his head. "I suppose not. I never saw a chickadee sit still. They have to be hopping or pecking or dee-deeing all the time. Are you going to live right on there in the old house? You ought to have somebody with

you—some healthy person who'll let *you* be sick now and then."

Clara met his kindly eyes without reproach. "Poor mother!" she said. "You never understood her—I know that. I'm going to take two of the school teachers to board. They come next week. Poor things, they live around anywhere now, and half starve. You need good, nourishing food when you're teaching school."

"Why the missionaries didn't get you, I don't know!" laughed the Bird House Man. "You'd have so enjoyed teaching hitherto perfectly contented Orientals that hot rice is bad for the stomach."

"Now you are laughing at me, and I'm going to Minnie's," she smiled.

"Oh, child, child, it's for your ain bairn ye should be makin' the wee clothes," Alec said softly, touching his big hand affectionately to her shoulder.

He felt her shiver under the touch, and she hastily averted her face. He said no more, but let her depart. It seemed to him she walked more slowly, as he watched her from the door, and certainly she was no longer singing under her breath.

Yet he was more surprised than anybody else in Southmead to hear, a few months later, when the snow was on the ground and Clara went about in a gray and black fur coat through the storms, looking

more than ever like a dauntless chickadee, that she was going to be married. She was going to marry Billie Chapman, but just now come into the proprietorship of J. C. Chapman's grocery and feed store, a local institution established by his grandfather and now passed on to him by his father, who was getting old. Billie was nearly forty. That he had long admired Clara was no secret. That he had been somewhat backward as a wooer in the past, due to the prospect of Mrs. Roberts as a possible mother-in-law, was no secret, either. Those who knew him best had sometimes taunted him with it, whereat his round face, behind the counter where the Blackstones and the cut plug reposed, would grow very red, and he would stammer in his wrath. Billie Chapman was a good soul, who accepted his politics and his religion from his father as readily as he accepted the store. He had always been shy with women, and he loved to go fishing—it was his one pastime. The conjunction of those two traits is deliberately made, and indicates to the wise reader something the kind of a man he was. He was a man destined to be a bachelor unless the right woman came along with the motherly instinct and the tact to convert him into a lover first and a good husband and kind father later.

Now, Clara undoubtedly had tact, and she bubbled

over with motherly instincts. Alec understood that. But she had once loved Don Barker, and instinctively the Bird House Man felt that hers was not a nature to forget. Under her cheery, buoyant exterior, he knew fires smouldered. And he wondered at the news, while all the rest declared how fine a match it was for both of them.

Even Miss Millie rejoiced.

"There, you see," she declared. "Clara *didn't* break her heart over that Don Barker, and I'm glad of it, too. He had no business to go away and leave her. She's got a better man, *I* say, who'll make her a good home, and she can—she can——"

"She can make baby things for home consumption," Alec prompted, his eyes twinkling into Millie's, who hastily replied, "Exactly."

"Well, perhaps you are right," he added. "Who can say? At any rate, she deserves a home of her own, with a good, sound, healthy male in it, to fetch and carry and put a hassock under her feet. But she won't let him, alas! She'll go running after that big loony's carpet slippers the minute he sets foot in the house."

"And quite right, too," said Miss Millie, with spirit.

"Far be it from me to dispute you," Alec laughed, "though that's a funny speech from a feminist."

"I'm *not* a feminist," Miss Millie declared. "I

only believe in *votes* for women, not—not cigarettes and latch-keys and—and things.”

She called to Siegfried and departed, pursued by Alec’s laughter.

The next time Clara Roberts passed the Bird House Alec ran out and invited her in for tea. It was a cold winter afternoon, and a huge fire was wallowing up the chimney of his study. Out beyond the dining-room, in his little aviary, the clarino was singing, flooding the house at intervals with his rich notes. In one of the study windows a glass box was so adjusted that the birds could come from outside far enough into the room to permit you to sit in an easy chair and observe them. The box held just now a steady procession of chickadees and nuthatches, with now and then a sparrow and a golden-crowned kinglet, coming after the suet and sunflower seeds which the box contained. Alec took the woman’s fur coat, sat her down in a big chair, hung his old black kettle on the crane and swung it in over the flames.

“None of your dirty alcohol lamps for me,” he said. “Tea should always have a taste of smoke in it. Well, Clara, so you’re going to be married? Tell me all about it.”

“But there’s nothing to tell,” she answered. “I’m going to be married, and—and there you are!”

"How frightfully unromantic!" Alec groaned. "Were there at least no circumstances attendant to the proposal the narration of which would gladden my dull afternoon?"

Clara's face, lit by the glow of the fire, was soft with a smile. "Poor Billie," she said, "poor Billie! He was a—a little clumsy, Uncle Alec. He didn't know how to excuse himself for not asking me before mother died, and he didn't know enough not to try. I felt so sorry for him."

"Was that why you took him?"

The girl met his gaze quite frankly for a second, and then looked back at the fire. "Partly, perhaps," she replied, after a pause. "Billie Chapman is a good man. I have known that he loved me for many years. He asked me to marry him when I was twenty, before father died. He—he asked me that time at a Sunday-school picnic. He had just eaten a doughnut, and there was a crumb on his chin. I remember how big it looked! It was all I could see. I—I was astonished and scared by his asking me. Nobody had ever asked me such a question before."

She broke off, still looking into the fire.

"That was eight years ago," she went on, after a moment. "He has been kind and faithful ever since. He has been very kind." She smiled again

to herself. "I think he might even have asked me once more while mother was alive, if I'd—I'd given him the proper encouragement," she added.

"You gave him no encouragement?"

"My first duty was to mother," she answered. "A wife's first duty is to her husband."

Alec refrained heroically from saying that a mother's first duty is to her child. What he did say was quite different. In fact, he had not intended to say it at all, but found that his lips had spoken as if independent of his will.

"Does Don know that your mother is dead?" was what he said.

He saw Clara's face go white as death, in spite of the firelight, and her hand go to her bosom. She turned startled, pleading eyes upon him for a second, as if begging for mercy, before she could control herself. She did not speak for a long moment, and the man wished that he had not asked the question.

"I don't know," she finally said, in a low voice. "What difference does it make? That is all over."

Alec laid his hand on hers an instant. "I didn't mean to ask," he said. "The words popped out before I could catch them. They popped out because my heart was asking the question, I suppose. Forgive me."

She gave his fingers a little squeeze. "That's all

right," she said. Then she rose quickly, took off the kettle, and began to make tea. When she again faced Alec, with his cup in her hand, her face was smiling once more.

"There are three lumps in it," she laughed, "which is all that is good for you, you old sweet tooth."

The next day Alec Farnum went to New York.

Don Barker was an engineer for a big construction company. He had left Southmead as a youth, to earn his way through the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and at twenty-three had been employed in Peru. After two years in the Andes he had come back to Southmead for a vacation before going with the New York firm. It was then he had asked Clara Roberts to marry him. They had been boy-and-girl sweethearts, however. Don Barker was the type of man who would not forget his first love, just as he did not forget his boyhood purpose to be an engineer, which had filled his mind even when he was but thirteen and built a ram in the brook to pump water into his father's barn. Yet he had forsaken Clara four years ago, upon her refusal to leave her mother, and the Bird House Man knew that the girl had not heard from him since. He wondered what had happened between them, more than appeared on the surface.

He did not find Don in his office. They told him

Mr. Barker was out on some subway work. It was not till the second day that the two met at dinner.

"Well, well, this is nice!" said the older man. "I began to think I was never going to see you again, since you won't come back to your old home. In fact, there's a strong suspicion in Southmead that you've done something you're ashamed of—embezzled, or raised a family or a beard."

The young man, who was lean and hard still, with his Yankee origin stamped on his face, laughed. "Nothing so bad as any of those things, Mr. Farnum," he said. "But I've been working pretty hard, and spending what vacations I've had out West, looking over some of the big new reclamation dams. I'd like to see Southmead again, too—but the—the chance doesn't seem to come. How is everybody there?"

"Oh, we're all pretty well. Ruth Barnes is married, and Millie Tilton's got a house of her own right next to mine, and has joined the suffragettes, and they've got a new set of hymn books in the Congregational Church, and our new sawbones, Tommy Trask (I guess you didn't know him, did you?), has rescued Margaret Weir from that Bleak House where she lived like a hermit, and—by the way, are *you* married?"

"I?" The young man looked at him quickly and

turned away. "No, none of that for me!" he added, a trifle brusquely.

Alec's eyes were watching his companion sharply, but he continued speaking in the same jovial bass. "Well, it's astonishing how we are all getting married off in Southmead," he went on. "Lack of any other occupation, I suppose. I'm even getting rather shaky myself. I don't know when it's going to hit me. Who do you think is the latest to get engaged?"

"You tell me," said Don.

"William Chapman!" cried Alec. "Yes, sir, bashful Bill!"

He watched the effect of his words, suspecting that Don knew of the shy grocer's attachment for Clara. The young man's face betrayed the thought which startled him. "Who—whom is Bill going to marry?" he asked, in a voice controlled with some effort.

Alec's own voice changed to a tone of gentleness. "The date has not been set yet," he said. "It will not be till summer, I suspect. Since her mother died last August, his fiancée has been taking some teachers to board, and her conscience would compel her to keep 'em the full year."

"You mean it's—it's——"

"Yes, Don, it's Clara," said the Bird House Man.

The other turned away his head. "Bill Chapman!" he half whispered.

Alec lit a cigar. "Let's go up into a corner of the club library where it's quiet," he said.

"I—I've got an engagement," Don mumbled.

"Yes, with me, upstairs. Come along."

The young man followed him in silence.

"Now, I'm going to tell you something," Alec continued, when they were seated again. "Clara loves you still. I stumbled on the truth without meaning to. I know nothing of what has happened between you two in the past. I only know she loves you still. I came to New York to give you this bit of information, if you were still free to receive it, as I gather you are. What you do with it, of course, is another matter."

The young engineer blew a nervous cloud of smoke. "You'll pardon me if I say your words sound like a curious contradiction," he said. "Clara is going to marry Bill Chapman, and Clara loves me—I don't get it, that's all."

"My dear boy, it wouldn't be the first time in the history of the human heart such a thing has happened. During all these years—four, is it, or five—since you left her, Clara has nursed that selfish old mother like a slave of conscience, and filled the void in her heart by also nursing all the other women's

babies in town. Now her mother has died. She is free—and the freedom hurts her more than the slavery. Something in her cries out for babies of her own. She's that kind of a woman, God bless her! Bill has loved her for a long time with his stupid, shy devotion. She pities him, she—oh, but can't you understand? It's a complex of many emotions. *I* can understand it plain enough. She's going to brick up a certain corner of her heart, and try to get some joy out of what is left."

Don was staring straight ahead with unwinking eyes. "I—I think I could see the tragedy of it, if I—if—well, I'm rather concerned in it myself," he said. "You see, I—I still love her, too!"

He blurted this last out, as if it choked him.

"I thought as much," said Alec quietly. "Tell me what happened five years ago."

The young man paused for some time before replying. "It's a hard thing to explain," he said finally. "If Clara had demanded that I stay in Southmead because her mother wouldn't leave it, if she'd said, 'You must choose between me and your career,' like a character in a magazine story, it would be easy enough to explain. Of course a man does always choose his career, unless he's a fool. But she didn't say anything like that."

"She wouldn't," Alec put in.

"No, she just looked at me with a kind of crooked smile—or I can see now it was crooked, I thought she was damn cheerful that day!—and said, 'I've talked it over with mother, all over again and again, and she can't leave her old home here. It would kill her. So we must say good-bye. You have your work in the world, I have mine.' That's word for word what she said. I can hear her still. Now, I'm no idol smasher as a rule, but I just reared up then and said a few things about parents and children and the New England conscience, and I don't know what all, and I ended by saying that if she loved me her first duty was to me and herself, to *us*, I said, and if she didn't see it that way, why, she didn't really love me and I'd get out and not bother her again. She just smiled some more when I said that, and told me I didn't mean what I said, and I said, 'Don't I?' and walked out, and I never went back when I heard her call my name, and I've never seen her nor Southmead since. Now, call me a stubborn, pig-headed Yankee if you want to, but those are the facts."

"You are a stubborn, pig-headed Yankee," said Alec. "Moreover, you are cruel into the bargain."

"Stubborn people always are," said Don. "I know that. What do you want me to do about it?"

"That is entirely for you to say. I don't want you to do anything that your heart doesn't dictate. I'm merely telling you that Clara is trying to wall up a corner of her heart, and when she thinks she has the memories all buried, she'll set a day to marry Bill Chapman. Incidentally, I have a spare room in my house, and the train to Southmead leaves the Grand Central at three twenty-five."

The young engineer rose from his chair, and threw his cigar into the fireplace. "Good-night," he said, putting out his hand. "Forgive me, but I've got to get out in the streets and walk. I'll—I'll wire you something when I know."

"Good-night, my boy," said Alec, laying a great hand on his shoulder. "Remember, it's the heart that makes for happiness in this world."

The Bird House Man went back to Southmead the next morning.

He heard nothing from Don for three days, and then a laconic wire arrived, which read:

"Coming on 3:25 to-morrow.

"D. B."

Alec promptly called up Clara Roberts on the 'phone and invited her to his house the next evening. "Maybe a little music, or something," he said.

Don arrived in time for a late dinner. He was

almost silent during the meal, and curiously nervous.

"I'll—I'll go right over there now," he finally said, when Mrs. Plumb had carried the coffee into the study. "I—I can't wait. If what you say is true—but I can't believe it—I must find out for myself. If it is——"

He broke off, his face tense. Alec could sense the struggle he had been through, the longing tugging at his heart, the wounded pride goading his stubborn will, the Yankee aversion to giving in even when in the wrong, perhaps especially when in the wrong.

"There is no need," the Bird House Man said quietly. "She will be here in a few moments."

"Does she know?" Don cried.

"Not a hint. She thinks it's a musicale," Alec chuckled.

They finished their coffee, again in silence, and then the Bird House Man led his guest into the next room. A moment later the bell rang. He answered it himself, and ushered Clara into the study. She warmed her hands before the blaze.

"You always have the nicest fires," she exclaimed. "But where are the rest? Who's going to make the music? You don't expect *me* to?"

"Part of it," the Bird House Man smiled. "It's to be a duet."

He had moved toward the door of the back room as he spoke, and now he crossed the threshold. Clara, her hands still toward the blaze, waited for him to return. A second later she heard the door shut, and looked up to smile once more at her host.

Instead of smiling, her face went deathly white, her two hands went up to her bosom convulsively, and she stood as if transfixed.

Don Barker was standing there by the door, which had been closed behind him, his eyes upon her, his lips apparently trying to form words which did not come. Then he took a sudden step toward her.

"Don!" she whispered, drawing back. "Don! Is it you?"

Still he did not speak, but drawing still nearer he held out his arms.

She put forth one hand to repel him. "No, no!" she said, again in a whisper.

"Clara"—the words were broken, as if forced out of him—"Clara, forgive me! I can say nothing now but I love you!"

"No, no, no, no!" she whispered, over and over.

She had retreated against Alec's desk, and could go no farther. The arms yearned toward her very close now. She looked into the face she knew so

well, and saw lines there she did not know, lines that had come with the years—and she saw longing there and love. Her hand was now against his breast, still pushing him away, but he seized it with one of his and put it to his lips, and then she resisted no more. With a low cry she let herself fall forward into his embrace, and gave her mouth to his.

Thus they stood, they knew not how long, their eyes closed, in the ecstasy of their reunion. But presently the woman put up her hands again and pushed him gently from her, taking his face between her palms and looking long into his eyes. Then she suddenly sank down in a chair and buried her own face in her hands, her body shaking.

He dropped on the floor beside her.

“What is it, what is it?” he whispered.

“Oh, Don, you have come too late!” she moaned. “You have broken your pride too late! It was easier to break my heart and yours than to break your pride, wasn’t it? Oh, why have you come at all, now?”

“I have come in time!” he cried. “Thank God, I have come in time! You love me still, and I love you. Don’t reproach me for my stubbornness, my foolishness, till to-morrow. Kiss me to-night.”

She shook her head, and tried to take his arm from about her waist. “You have come too late,” she

said again. "Hasn't Mr. Alec told you? I'm engaged to be married."

"He told me, yes—and to whom," said Don. "But you can't marry him now. You love me. I don't care whether you forgive me for how I've acted, so long as you marry me. Dearest, I've got to have you!"

He laid his lips on her neck, for her face was turned from him.

"No, no, no! You mustn't, you shan't!" she cried again, trying to draw away. "I am engaged to another man. I am honour bound to another man. You have come too late!"

Don rose to his feet, and stood in front of her. "Do you love me?" he demanded. "Never mind what I've done, and the reasons you have for thinking all manner of ill of me. But do you love me?"

Her only answer was a moan.

"Do you love the other man? Really love him, in—in—in the way we kissed just now?"

She shrank down into the chair. "Don't, don't!" she cried.

"Then, by God, you shan't marry him, and you shall marry me!" Don exclaimed. "Your conscience may have made a slave of you, but it shan't make something worse! Look at me!"

As if she could not help it, she raised her eyes to his.

"I've given up my stubbornness," he said, "or my pride, or whatever it is. Raw egotism, perhaps. I've come to you because I love and long for you still, and I'll do any penance you ask. We've spoiled our lives enough, you and I. We start in now living for ourselves, do you hear, just our two selves!"

"People can't live just for themselves," the girl replied. "Oh, Don, they can't. They'd never *really* be happy if they did. *I've given my word!* He—he loves me. He'd suffer so. *And I've given my word!*"

The man bit his lip a second. "Will you leave it to Mr. Farnum to judge?" he said. "I've told him my story. You told him yours, whether you meant to or not. He came to New York just to let me know you still loved me. Will you let him decide?"

"He went to New York to tell you?" she whispered. "Mr. Alec did that, when he knew about Billie?"

"Yes, just that," said Don. "You trust him. Will you let him judge?"

He dropped again on his knees before her and suddenly kissed her eyes as he had done long years before. Her lips parted as her eyes closed, her bosom heaved, and her hands clasped his shoulders instinctively.

"I—I—oh, Don, you mustn't tempt me, you mustn't kiss me that way, you mustn't!"

"May I call him?" he asked, again kissing her lips.

She tried to say no, but she couldn't. She could only nod yes with her head. Don sprang to the door and called.

The Bird House Man had evidently been in the kitchen, talking to Mrs. Plumb. He came quickly at the call, and stood near the door, looking silent inquiry at the pair before him. The young man spoke first.

"We love each other still, Clara and I," he said. "Clara does not love the man she is engaged to, but me. But there seems to be another—there seems to be a case of conscience involved. We wish you to be the judge. Clara has given her word to marry this other man, and says she cannot break it. My point is that the sin of a loveless marriage is greater still—that it is better to break her word than my heart, and hers, too—for she will break her heart. She will think of me all her life now in—in the night watches."

There came a little moan from the girl.

Alec moved closer to her, and laid his fingers lightly on her shoulder.

"Look up at me," he said.

She looked up into his face, her eyes filled with a great unhappiness.

"Clara," he continued, "a promise of marriage is a pledge not lightly to be broken. Only a light woman would do so, and you are not that. But a promise of marriage given when the heart cannot be given with it can be a wicked thing. The only way to atone for that sin is to undo the evil, to break the pledge, before it is too late."

"You mean—you mean, that I was *wicked* to promise to marry poor Billie?" she whispered, incredulous.

"I leave it to your conscience to answer," Alec declared. "You know best whether you loved him when you promised. You know best whether you had forgotten Don, whether it was Billie your soul hungered for—as the father of your children."

He spoke slowly, quietly, solemnly, his hand still resting lightly on her shoulder. He felt her shiver under his touch, as she buried her face once more in her hands.

"But Billie," she said, in a smothered voice, "it will break *his* heart, perhaps, and it is so wicked not to keep a promise. That is telling a lie!"

"One heart has got to be broken, anyway—so far as hearts ever are broken," the Bird House Man replied. "Yours will not be, should you give Don up

again, Clara, for you take a kind of Calvinistic joy in sacrifice, which is a strange form of virtuous sin, or sinful virtue, possibly peculiar to New England. But I say it *is* wicked to keep a promise when it is the promise of something the man by every right expects, and you cannot really give."

"Oh, this is so——" Don began, but the Bird House Man raised his hand in a command for silence, and bent his face again toward the girl.

She looked up at him once more, by an evident effort refraining from looking toward her lover.

"But if I—I break my word to Billie," she said, "how will I ever be sure it was not really for my selfish happiness? It's what I *want* to do. Oh, Mr. Alec, you can never know, nobody can ever know, how terribly I *want* to do it! When we *want* to do things so badly, they are usually selfish and—and wrong."

Don almost writhed in his effort to keep from speech, but the older man still spoke quietly and gently.

"True happiness comes from wanting very hard to do the things which are right," he said, "and sometimes being able to do them. One of the things which is eternally right in this world is to mate with some one whom your heart and soul desire, and be the mother of his children. If it is right to love babies—and

you think it is, don't you, Clara?—it is right to want the father your heart desires for your own babies, and a sin, yes, a grave and bitter sin, to take any other father for them. Poor little wisps of helplessness, to be moulded into minds and souls by every breath of environment, can they who are born of a reluctant marriage bed be the same as those who are born of perfect love? Clara, my dear, don't let a split hair of conscience stand in the way of one of the great verities of life!"

The girl had sat with her head in her hands while he spoke, and so she remained for a long moment after. Then she uncovered her face and raised it, her cheeks flushed, and looked first at Alec, and then slowly, almost timidly, at her lover, who stood silent and pleading before her, as if holding his breath, with arms just lifting to stretch toward her.

"Don," she breathed. "Don, I cannot let it be any one but you!"

Then she buried her face in her hands once more, and her lover fell on his knees before her, took the hands gently down, and laid her cheek to his, while Alec smiled upon them both.

"I think that duet has been sung after all," he said presently. "Or is it just begun?"

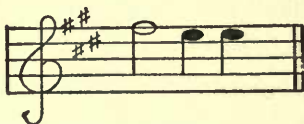
Clara Roberts smiled for the first time since she

had looked up from the fire, and seen her lover in the room. She smiled her old, cheerful, brave smile.

"It has just begun," she answered.

"That's my chickadee again!" cried Alec. "All the song you need is in three notes. 'I love you,' is what it says."

He whistled softly the bird's call.



"You must teach it to him, too," said Clara. "It shall always be our signal, Don, yours and mine—and Mr. Alec's."

"Whatever we have shall be Mr. Alec's, too, you bet!" cried her lover, springing up and catching the Bird House Man by the hand.

"No, sir," cried Alec, "I won't have Clara's conscience!"

"God bless her for it, *I* say," Don answered tenderly and humbly, going again to her side and putting an arm around her shoulder. "It means depths of loyalty we men know very little about."

"You are on the road to wisdom, young man," laughed Alec, rubbing his hands delightedly. "Isn't he, Clara?"

Her eyes were sparkling now, her face almost

transformed by happiness. She took Don's hand in hers and patted it. "There are lots of things you men know very little about," she said. "That's why we women have such a hard time."

CHAPTER IX

THE GOLDFINCH

WHEN Southmead heard that the Smith house had been rented for the summer to a teacher of eurhythmic dancing there was great excitement and much rushing to the public library for information as to the significance of "eurhythmic." To be sure, little was learned at the library. Alec Farnum suggested that the word probably came from Plato, but Miss Millie Tilton said she was sure Plato never danced. The teacher's name was Flora Dale Johnson, which Alec said was almost as fine an anticlimax as "For God, for country, and for Yale." She had hit upon Southmead, it seemed, because the place was so quiet and not yet invaded by summer boarders. Joe Toms, the real estate man who had conducted the transaction, confessed as much when the fact of her coming was known. He also confessed that Flora Dale Johnson herself was "some swell dame" (Joe wasn't a native of Southmead, and used vulgar expressions). The Smith house, which stood in a grove a quarter of a mile out of the village, was a big square house with a cupola, once

the residence of a well-to-do family who had all died out or moved away. In recent years somebody had altered it over for a summer boarding-house, but the venture had failed.

"The dame gave it the once over, and then made for the grove," said Joe. "She seemed more interested in that. Said it was an ideal spot for a daffy dance——"

"A what?" asked Alec, who was listening.

"Well, something like that," said Joe. "Guess it will be daffy, all right. She said the ground was nice and smooth, and wouldn't hurt her girls' bare feet."

With this parting bomb shell he left the post office, while all of his auditors gasped, except Alec Farnum who was chuckling. It had just occurred to him that "daffy" was Daphne.

Coincident with Joe's disclosure that the pupils were to dance barefoot, came Mrs. Alvin Sanborn's discovery in a magazine of a picture showing eurhythmic dancers in action. To be sure, the picture was taken in Germany, but there was the word eurhythmic, large as life. Mrs. Sanborn took one horrified look at the picture, and then another, and then a third—and then she showed it to Miss Jones, the librarian. After that, the fat was in the fire. Everybody expected the worst. Dr. Tommy

Trask, after listening to various conversations, confided to his friend, the Bird House Man, that in his opinion most of the male inhabitants hoped for the worst, which Alec had to confess was probably true. There was much talk of preventing the scandal to the fair name of Southmead, and the matter was agitatedly taken up at a meeting of the First Parish Mothers' Club. But, after all, as several shopkeepers pointed out, two-score or more additional people for the summer was a boon not lightly to be cast aside, and the lease was signed, and the house was a quarter of a mile from the village, and nobody really knew what Miss Flora Dale Johnson's school was like, and women were dancing barefoot everywhere nowadays, as you might see from the Sunday papers, and why not wait? As the entire village really wanted to wait, they waited.

Presently Flora Dale Johnson and several of her pupils arrived, with trunks that filled two wagons, and with half a dozen maids and a Japanese cook.

"Looks ter me ez if they wuz contemplatin' wearin' *some* clo'es," remarked Kib Turner who drove the depot hack, as he viewed the pile of baggage. "I git twenty-five cents apiece fer haulin' them trunks. On with the dance, is my motter."

In a day or two more all the pupils had arrived, nearly two-score of them, "Of assorted shapes and

colours," as Tommy Trask put it to the Bird House Man, "and ages," he added. There were young girls of seventeen or eighteen laughing and lithe and fashionably clad, there were somewhat soberer girls in the twenties, somewhat less slender, and there were even one or two women perilously close to Pier 40, who, as Tommy said—he had no reverence—certainly needed all outdoors to dance in. The Smith house was overrun with them all. There were six or eight servants to attend to their needs. Delivery wagons from the village were kept busy. Two pianos and a huge phonograph arrived. Music began to issue from the open windows. Laughter resounded through the grove. Groups of girls, arm in arm across the sidewalk, came down to the drug-store for picture post-cards and candy, and Southmead lined up in front of the post office and stared.

Then the lessons began, and Southmead knew the worst.

"I happened to be going by this morning," said Miss Jones, the librarian, to her friend Mrs. Sanborn, "and I heard music in the grove, so I just climbed up the bank and looked over the fence, and *what* do you think I saw?"

"Barefoot, I suppose."

"*Barefoot!* My dear, it didn't stop at their feet! They had on nothing, absolutely nothing, but Swiss

ribbed combinations as—as abbreviated as a man's bathing suit, and over them white chiffon gowns, Greek, I suppose they call 'em, caught up above their knees with an elastic band. Their arms and shoulders were bare, and when they hopped about you could see—oh, my dear, you have no idea of it!"

"But what were they doing?" asked Mrs. Sanborn, her eyes reflecting her determination to have an idea of it at the earliest possible moment.

"I could hardly make out *what* they were doing," said Miss Jones. "There was a phonograph playing away under a tree, and they were all going through motions together, with their arms and legs, in time to the music. It looked very silly to me. There was that Flora Dale Johnson female among 'em, without any clothes on either, and I could hear her saying something about rhythm. I must say she has pretty arms."

For the next few weeks in Southmead woman's place was most assuredly not the home. There was a farm just up the road beyond the Smith place which did a sudden and unprecedented business in eggs. All the women in town suddenly wanted eggs. The men of the village found excuses more difficult (or perhaps one had better say explanations), but most of them contrived to get up the Smith place way at least once in the daylight. In the

evening the road thither became lovers' lane, though the pupils never performed out of doors after night-fall. By day, however, they danced or sat around in the grove in their chiffon slips, apparently quite indifferent to the line of spectators over the fence, not betraying the slightest consciousness that they were immodestly clad. Their legs soon became red with mosquito bites, and their necks and arms tanned with the sun. One of the pianos was placed on the side veranda, and all day long they danced on the lawn and under the trees as if it were the most natural proceeding in the world. Some of them went to church on Sunday. All of them were polite to the townsfolk, behaved with perfect decorum on the streets, and the youngest and prettiest of the pupils, when some of the village youths attempted to address them, put a stop to such advances in the way that only nice girls can. The boys left them alone after that. All of which was faintly disappointing to Mrs. Sanborn.

The director of the school presently invited Alec and Ruth and Rob Eliot and one or two more who, acquaintance had shown her would be interested, to a nearer view of the dancing. Alec was quizzically curious, Ruth still inclined to be a little shocked, and Rob frankly enthusiastic. By this time some of the advanced pupils had reached the stage called

plastic expression. They "realized" a piece of music, and expressed by their dancing the mood it evoked in them. One young girl, after listening to Macdowell's "To a Wild Rose," announced that it made her think of clouds.

"Then express clouds," cried an assistant teacher. "A cloud is a little boat that floats and floats and *floats* and FLOATS, till it meets a little wind that blows it higher and higher and *higher*, until it is nearly wrecked, and then finally it reaches a safe harbour on the sunset horizon. Now express that, dearie."

Alec smiled, but Dearie set her teeth and with a look of painful determination proceeded to fall in with the music, and floated and floated and *floated* and FLOATED, and met the wicked little wind, and endeavoured to be blown higher and higher and *higher*, till the shipwreck was almost a painful actuality. Dearie was not over and above graceful, and the spectacle was a little ludicrous. But a moment later a different dance was staged. A tall, slender girl, her hair done up tightly, her gown abbreviated like a man's tunic, sprang out as Apollo, and pursued a girl with streaming hair as Daphne. Daphne for some time eluded her pursuer, and when she was panting and almost captured, suddenly slipped behind a tree, as if she had been changed in form. Then Apollo looked about bewildered, and

from every tree appeared the form of a maiden with streaming hair. They danced about him, and ever, as he tried to seize one, she eluded his grasp and vanished behind the trunk. In the grove of big oaks and chestnuts, under the dappled shadows, with the music lilting (a compilation from Gluck), these white figures moving in rhythm, with their tossing bare arms and their white legs and streaming hair, made a picture of great loveliness. Alec waxed enthusiastic and declared that he would never be happy till a water dance had been staged by his pond, and even Ruth applauded.

But Ruth had noticed, during the dance, the face of a spectator over the fence, and now called Alec's attention to her. It was Susan Hall. Susan was a smallish, rather colourless young woman of indefinite age—indefinite because she had not been born in Southmead, and so could keep her secret. She had corn-coloured hair and made periodic attempts to dress in the latest fashion which always appeared slightly ludicrous as she walked to church beside her sober husband, Tom Hall, who was probably ten years older than she, dressed in black, and six days in the week served as cashier in the bank. On the seventh day he was the superintendent of the Sabbath School. The Halls had no children.

Flora Dale Johnson followed the direction of her

guests' glances. "Oh, that woman," she said. "It's a funny thing about her. She appeared the second week we were here, and I don't believe she's missed a day since. She doesn't seem to come out of idle curiosity like the rest. I think she really loves the dancing. Yesterday she came timidly in and begged me to let her see how the costumes are made."

"How curious," said Ruth. "That little mouse!"

"Couldn't we have her in now?" asked Alec. "Do you mind?"

"Certainly not; ask her," the teacher replied.

Alec went out to the fence with the message, and Susan Hall's face grew rosy and then radiant. "Oh, I'd *love* to!" she cried.

She greeted the director timidly, and when she was introduced to one or two of the dancers she drew near them and studied their robes, plucking at a fastening here and there and asking questions. When another dance started, she sat down abruptly, and gave her whole attention to it.

A pupil had "realized" some piece of music as the pursuit of the ideal, and was trying to express the pursuit by going on and on and on and *on* and ON, while the ideal fluttered away and away and *away* amid the trees of the grove. Alec, watching the newcomer keenly, saw her hands imitating with al-

most imperceptible motions the beat of the dancer's hands, and her whole body tense with strain, as if she herself were doing the dance mentally.

When the exhibition was over he walked back toward the village beside her, while Rob and Ruth Eliot walked on ahead.

"Wasn't it wonderful!" she exclaimed, almost as if to herself.

"I didn't know you were so interested in dancing," said Alec.

"Neither did I," she answered. "When they first came here Mr. Hall—Tom—said I wasn't to go near them. He thinks they are very immodest and horrid. But I went finally—everybody's been, I guess. I don't think they are immodest, do you?"

Alec smiled. "Millie Tilton still thinks they are," he said.

"But *you* don't, and Ruth and Mr. Eliot don't," she went on eagerly. "Why, they've just opened a kind of new world to me, or rather reopened it."

She paused as if she didn't know how to continue.

"Reopened?" Alec prompted.

There was a frown between the woman's brows. "I don't know how to talk and express things," she said. "We—we don't talk much in my house. Sometimes Mr. Hall—Tom—sits through an entire meal without saying a word."

Alec shot a keen glance at her. He scented sudden unexpected dramatic possibilities. "But it isn't hard when you've broken the first ice," he said kindly.

"I—I know. Well, when I was a girl, over in Bentford, I began to take piano lessons. I guess I wasn't really musical, or I'd have kept on after I got married. Only we didn't have a piano—we couldn't afford one at first, and Mr. Hall—Tom—has never thought one was necessary. He did give me a phonograph for Christmas, but that's not the same thing, is it?"

"Not quite," said Alec. "You mean you don't make the music *yourself*, with the phonograph?"

"That's it!" she cried. "That's just it! When I was beginning to get so I could play a little I'd hear the teacher get the rhythm out of a tune, and then I'd see the notes in front of me at home, and know the rhythm was in them, and I'd—I'd just feel *good* all over when I could make it come out! And chords, too. Some chords would make me feel sad, and some would make me shut my eyes and see pictures."

"And you mean these dances have made you see pictures and want to get the rhythm out of yourself again, eh?"

She nodded her head. "They've sort of given life a meaning again," she answered.

It was Alec's turn to frown. "How old are you?" he asked.

"I'm thirty-two," she answered. "I ought to be a middle-aged wife, and not talking such nonsense, oughtn't I?"

"Some people would say so," he replied. "Personally, I think you ought to be back there taking lessons."

"Oh, if I only could! But Mr. Hall would divorce me on the spot. It's made trouble enough as it is."

"You mean?"

Rob and Ruth at that moment turned around to address some remark to the two behind, and the woman muttered quickly: "Never mind what I mean. Let's not talk about it any more."

At the first branch street she turned off rapidly toward her house. "I mustn't be late with Mr. Hall's lunch," she said.

Alec shook his head. "How very stupid some good people are," he remarked. "No, I don't mean you, Ruth. You're no better than you ought to be."

He thought a good deal in the next day or two of this chance glimpse into the domestic life of the Halls. Tom Hall he had known from boyhood, and two or three times a week passed a pleasant word with him over the till of the bank, or met him on the

village street. That Tom would ever be deliberately unkind to anybody was incredible. He was slow and solid and conservative, but he was a just man with an almost painfully acute conscience in his daily dealings, and he held many positions of trust in the town. That he had married a colourless and uninteresting girl had never surprised Alec. What did surprise him was to find that she was neither colourless nor uninteresting, and that the domestic life of Tom Hall, which he had always fancied went jogging placidly along, was evidently bumping on the rocks of misunderstanding.

He went into the bank and looked at Tom sharply. The man's face actually did look troubled.

Alec cashed a check. "Seen these new dancers yet, Tom?" he asked innocently, as he took the bills. "They're well worth it. I saw one of the prettiest dances I ever saw in my life up there the other day."

The cashier's hand jingled the pile of loose change it rested on. "I've not," he answered briefly. "What's more, I don't want to."

"Oh, come, that's unfair and illiberal," said Alec. "Look at everything before you judge it."

"I've seen enough of that dancing!"

"But if you've not been up there——" Alec began.

Tom bit his lip. Then he seemed suddenly to come to a decision. Leaning over the till and speak-

ing in a low voice so that the bookkeeper could not hear him, he said, "Alec, will you come home with me? It's after eleven. Dan can handle things till lunch."

"Why, certainly, if you wish," the elder man answered, surprised.

Tom jammed his hat on his head, and set out at a rapid pace, explaining nothing. His house was on a pleasant little side street, with a backyard running down to the river. The yard was screened by a hedge of Japanese willow on one side; on the other was a bit of wood, for it was the last house on the street. There were no flowers in the doorway, though the small lawn was neatly clipped. The two men walked up the path. From somewhere in the rear they could hear a phonograph, playing Grieg's "Slumber Song." On the step Tom paused a moment, as if the sound hurt him.

"I've—I've got to tell somebody," he stammered. "You—you understand things—women—you've always been a good friend to me, Alec. Maybe you don't remember it was you got me the job in the bank. I—go in, please."

He held open the door, and Alec entered. Then he led the way through a bare, stiff parlour, through the dining-room where the table was set for lunch, and the kitchen, and out on the back porch. He had

opened the back door quietly, and stood pointing into the rear yard. Alec needed no beckoning finger, however. Susan Hall, clad in a chiffon gown like those of the eurhythmic dancers, except that it was bright yellow and had two side pieces caught to her wrists with ribbons so that they waved like wings when she raised her arms, was dancing barefoot to the strains of Grieg's lullaby.

The yard was carpeted only with sparse grass, for Tom thriftily kept chickens which now and then were allowed out of the coop. There were some vegetables on one side, but only a straggling handful of flowers here and there, and a tall weed or two. The strange, bare-legged apparition in yellow was gyrating from one flower or weed to the next, swooping up and dipping down to the peculiar lift and scoop of the music.

"*That* is what it's come to—*my wife!*" said Tom, under his breath. Then he started to call to her, when Alec laid a quick hand on his arm.

"Don't!" the Bird House Man exclaimed. "Be a gentleman, and let me withdraw. What is she dancing?"

"She thinks she's a goldfinch, I believe," Tom muttered. "She says that tune reminds her of the way they fly."

"By Jove, she's right!" exclaimed Alec.

"Are you crazy, too?" Tom almost sneered. "All right, go back in the house. I'm going to stop her."

Alec stepped back into the kitchen. Instantly he heard the man call out, "Stop that dancing and come in and dress yourself properly!"

There was no reply from the woman, but the phonograph ceased.

"You'd better be quick, too," the man added. "Mr. Farnum's in the house."

Alec heard the woman's voice now, close to the porch, and he slipped to the shelter of the dining-room door.

"I don't believe Mr. Farnum will mind seeing me," she was saying. "He was watching forty girls dressed this way the other day, and said he liked it." Her tone was irritably sarcastic.

"So you've been up there again, have you?" Tom answered. "Well, whether you want Mr. Farnum to see you without any clothes on or not, *I don't!* What's more, I won't have it. Go into the house and dress!"

There was a long pause. Then Alec heard the woman's voice, like the voice of a stranger:

"You have told me for the last time what I shall or what I shall not do," she said. "That may be your idea of marriage. It isn't mine. Hereafter you'll speak to me as little as possible, and that to

tell me what you want for meals. I am going in now because it is time to get your luncheon. I trust you haven't invited Mr. Farnum to stay. That *would* be a merry party!"

Alec slipped into the front room, and heard her bare feet go pattering into the hall and up the stairs.

Tom came into the parlour behind her. He was wiping the sweat from his brow, and his face was drawn with perplexed agony.

"You heard?" he said.

Alec nodded.

"*Now* you know what I have to contend with—what my life is," he added.

"I know now that you are a fool, Tom," was all Alec replied, and walked out of the house.

He thought it best to allow his parting shot to sink in, but the next morning, when he knew that Tom would be busy at the bank with the town payrolls, he went to the house. Susan, looking as if she had spent a sleepless night, let him in.

"I heard what took place yesterday," he said at once. "I also saw a bit of your dance. The goldfinches do fly with the swoop of that music, that's a fact."

She did not brighten at his praise. "Where is it all going to end?" she said wearily.

"I hope in a better understanding from both of you," he answered cheerfully.

"Both of us?"

"Yes, both of you. It takes two to make a kiss or a quarrel. I can't say I much blame you, but I can't wholly blame Tom, either."

"But you said you saw no harm in that dancing, you said——"

"That's not quite what I mean," Alec interrupted gently. "If it were only Tom's old-fashioned, granite-headed Puritan objection to bare legs in his backyard, the case wouldn't be so difficult. Old-fashioned notions always have to give way sooner or later. What you've got to fight is Tom's total lack of comprehension of the human soul's need, your need, for some form of creative, esthetic expression. Don't let those big words trouble you. You'll get my drift. And that he hasn't the ghost or the glimmer of such comprehension is partly your fault, my dear."

"My fault?"

"Yes, yours." Alec swept his arm around the bare, stiff parlour. "You've been married almost a dozen years, haven't you, and look at this room! *You* don't think it's pretty, now do you? Anybody who could love those dances we saw couldn't find any joy in this room. Where are your pictures—good, bright pictures? Where are your cut flowers?"

Where are the flowers out in your yard? Where are the books that ought to be on your table? A Sunday-school weekly and yesterday's *Springfield Republican*! Where is your piano? You ought to have made him get you a piano years ago. If he wouldn't, you ought to have skimped his food till you saved up for it. You ought to have been playing at him these dozen years every evening. Instead of that—what happened? You gave in to this haircloth horror of a parlour on the day he brought you here, and now, when you revolt and kick off your shoes and stockings and go dancing half-naked defiance in the backyard, you wonder that he doesn't understand!"

The woman was silent, looking at the floor. She suddenly flung up her head. "Yes, this room is ugly, ugly, ugly!" she cried. "I do hate it. I've always hated it! I wanted to make it bright years and years ago. I took down that awful shepherd hugging a lamb, and put up a coloured picture. We had a scene then. I've never tried again."

Alec shook his head. "You should have shifted the shepherd to a pasture on the side wall first," he smiled. "Remember, Tom holds the old things dear, and that engraving is part of his religion to him, in a sense. Maybe you should have begun with flowers. Go get two vases."

"I don't know if there are any in the house," she said, astonished.

"Then bring a couple of kitchen bowls—blue earthenware if you have 'em."

The woman obeyed, bewildered, and Alec, stepping out on the porch, brought in a basket he had deposited there before he rang. It was full of flowers. "Those two bowls are not enough," he declared. "Get something tall and fairly slim. Lord, what a house! Nothing to put flowers in. You ought to be ashamed."

Susan reappeared a moment later with a tall china chocolate pot. "This is all I can find," she said.

"It will do," Alec declared. "Now help me."

They filled the chocolate pot with the straight spikes of larkspur, hiding the lid with leaves, and turning the handle to the wall stood it on the mantel. Then, in the two earthen bowls, they arranged the other blooms, a bowl of sweet peas and a bowl of roses, and stood one on a table, while Alec carried the other to the dining-room and placed it on the centrepiece—or, rather, in the spot where there should have been a centrepiece.

"There," he cried, "don't they lighten up your house a bit?"

"Of course they do," said the woman mournfully.

"But where am I going to get flowers to use every day?"

"Where are you going to get them? Out of your own garden, of course! Not this year, but next. This year I presume you're going to come up to my garden and pick 'em."

"But Mr. Hall isn't interested in gardening," she said. "He raises some vegetables in the backyard because he thinks it's economical, that's all. I asked him once to make me a flower bed in front of the house and all he said was it would spoil the lawn."

"Make it yourself, then," Alec retorted. "The trouble with you is, Susan, that you haven't any strength of character. If at any time you'd shown Tom persistently how pretty a room can look full of flowers and brightness, and how nice his house could look with roses over the porch and foxgloves by the path, he'd have had off his coat working every night. But you didn't have strength of character enough to do that, which means you didn't really care very much about flowers and pretty rooms yourself. Tom is a solid, plodding man, from a solid, plodding stock. He was brought up on cornbread, the Bible, and 'Work for the night is coming.' All the normal esthetic instincts are dormant in him. It was your task as a wife years

ago to lay siege to them, to play Prince to the Sleeping Beauty. Instead, you let your own go to sleep, too. And now you are suddenly at odds with each other, and rasping each other's nerves. Isn't that true?"

"I suppose so," she answered. "Yes, it's true, especially the nerves. Oh, *that's* been coming some time. It wasn't only this dancing. And I will not be told by any man what I must and must not do!"

"I don't blame you there," said Alec gently. "How did you come to marry Tom, by the way?"

"Why—why——" she hesitated, as if surprised by the question. "I guess he just made me. He used to come over to Bentford on business, and father'd bring him home to lunch, and—and he fell in love with me. He was handsome then——"

"He's handsome now," Alec interrupted.

"Well, he was younger then, not middle-aged and settled, and I was a girl, and he just took me. But it's different when a handsome man of thirty tells you you must love him, and the same man tells you twelve years later that you must not do what you want to do, just because he doesn't happen to like it!"

"Yes," said Alec with a little smile, "it's as different as marriage from courtship. But you must remember—try to remember—that Tom loves you,

and it is because he loves you that he feels so deeply your revolt from what he thinks is the only path to salvation. Now you and I have got a big task ahead of us—I include myself, because I'm going to try to help, as an old friend of Tom's. Our task is to show him his isn't the only path. We must have patience and tact. All I'm going to suggest to you now is, that you keep the house full of flowers out of my garden, and that you go up to Flora Dale and have her train you in that dance. I've got her to promise she will."

"*What!*" exclaimed Susan. "You suggest *that* as a way to win Tom?"

"You will certainly gain nothing if you patch up a truce by backing down," said Alec. "Only don't fight with him about it. I shall tell him myself that it was my suggestion. Good-bye, little woman. Don't forget—fresh flowers every two days! You may keep the basket to fetch 'em in."

The Bird House Man went down the path, noting as he went the neat little square of lawn, which represented poor Tom's limit of esthetic expression. The path was trimmed with mathematical precision. He could see Tom coming home from the bank and getting out the edger.

"That's the kind who often make the best gardeners," he said to himself.

He went to the bank at three o'clock. "I've come to take you to my house, this time," he said.

The man walked glum and troubled at his side. "You called me a fool yesterday, Alec," he said. "I guess it makes any man mad to be called a fool, but I've been thinking it over, and wondering why you said it. I can't stay mad at you."

"Of course not!" the Bird House Man laughed. "Nobody can. I just won't let 'em. I called you a fool, Tom, because you are one. Any man's a fool in this day and generation who tries to tell an intelligent woman that she must or must not do a thing. Women are people nowadays, Tom, people even before they are wives. Neither you nor Susan read enough, you both ought to be ashamed of your ignorance. But she's got a woman's intuition, and she knows that her sex is on the march. You are a fool for not knowing it, too. You think you are your grandfather, and as I recall old Madame Hall, your grandfather would have been a bit of a fool, also, to give *her* too many orders."

Tom managed a crooked smile at the mention of his grandmother, who had been noted in Southmead for her bass voice and "managing" proclivities. "But when my wife was doing something she ought to have been ashamed of——" he began.

"Nonsense," Alec interrupted, leading the way

into the multicoloured bloom and bird song of his garden. "She was doing nothing of the kind. Now, sit down here, Tom, and listen to me. I'm going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle, and you've got to take it, too. But first, look at my garden. Isn't it pretty?"

Tom looked about him at the riotous beds, the winding paths, the sundial, the bird baths. "Yes," he said, "of course, it's pretty. You always did have a pretty garden."

"Why don't you have one? Women like flowers. Every woman ought to have flowers to put in her house. If you look at your wife at dinner across a bowl of roses, that will help to keep the blush on her cheeks."

"Why, I—I—I don't know," the man stammered. "I never was much of a hand at flowers."

"Well, never mind that now," Alec went on. "Only I'm shy of a house where they don't keep flowers on the table. Tom, not being married myself, I know a lot more about women than you do. I know some things about your wife that you don't know. She's told me—to your everlasting shame, because it was you she ought to have told——"

"Me!" cut in Tom bitterly. "She doesn't talk at all to me now! She moved all her things into the spare room last night."

“Exactly. You violated her sense of independent personality by trying to order her about. I don’t blame her. But that’s not it. Before you married her she was studying the piano. It wasn’t much, maybe, but it was the only way she had of expressing that bit of the artist which is in her soul—which is in the soul of most of us. You never gave her a piano, did you? She choked off that artist in her when she married you, and it’s never good for us to choke off our worthy impulse. These dances this summer have evidently come at a time when she had just about choked down her impulses as long as she could, with nothing to take their place. Something she felt in the dances called to her like a voice of nature, and she just had to respond. All the impulses she has been bottling up for twelve years to make her own hands or her own feet express her inward love of rhythm, all her instincts to create a bit of beauty herself, just popped right out. She was doing no harm in her yellow gown and her bare feet, prancing about her own backyard. You were mad because she was doing something you didn’t approve of, and your vanity was a bit wounded, too, because she was disobeying you. I daresay to you she was ridiculous and immodest. To me she was pathetic. I saw a woman who ought to have had a piano for the past twelve years.”

Alec paused, and there was a silence.

"I couldn't get her a piano at first—I was too poor," said Tom.

"But later, eh?"

"My mother never had a piano, and she didn't leave my father's bed!" said the man.

"Your mother had five children," said Alec quietly.

Again there was silence. Tom Hall averted his face.

"You love your wife, don't you?" Alec asked.

"Love her!" the man dug his fingers into his palms. "Of course I love her! Sometimes I've been afraid I loved her more than God, and prayed for help. That's—that's what makes it so hard."

"Yes, you do love her—in your way," Alec mused. "But I can fancy it's hard for her to guess it sometimes as you sit there silent in your hideous parlour, thinking over the bank's affairs, or the Sunday-school text."

"Hideous parlour—what do you mean?"

"Just what I say, Tom. Your parlour is hideous. It gives me the creeps. It's barer than your yard, even. You live the barest life of any man I know—no colour, no fun, no flowers, no music, no beauty. You set the stage poorly for a love scene, my friend."

Again Tom was silent, looking at the ground.

"I made arrangements this morning for Susan to take lessons of the new dancing teacher," Alec went on. "No, don't interrupt! You are going to sit right there and hear me out. She might as well learn right, while she's about it. In spite of what you think, this dancing combines a great deal of value—sense of musical rhythm, grace of body, and imagination. If I had a girl, I'd make her study it. There'd be less horrible onesteps banged out on pianos and whined out on phonographs if everybody learned it, at any rate. The barefoot part is innocent and pictorial, but not essential. Susan isn't an idiot, if she did marry you. She's not going to appear barefoot at the next Town Hall dance. But she is, unless I'm mistaken, going to be able to take hold of our high-school girls this winter and give them some wholesome training. Perhaps she can stage a little dancing pageant in their play. We might even have a June dance here in my garden. The girls would love it. It would mean a lot for most of them, who walk like kangaroos and never hear good music and think that dancing means nothing but a chance to flirt on the back steps of the Town Hall. And it would give Susan a chance to do something, to use her imagination, to express herself."

"She has a Sunday-school class," Tom put in.

"She needn't dance on Sunday," Alec laughed,

"even if dancing was a part of religious observance in the old days."

"Besides, I won't have her taking lessons of that——"

"Tut, tut!" said the Bird House Man. "Don't say you *won't*. The time has passed between you two when you can say will or won't! Take it from an old meddler who wishes you both well, my boy, go home and woo your wife all over again, if you want to win her back. Now, I'm through with you."

"But I want to say——"

"I'm through with you. Get out! I want to work," cried Alec. "You've taken up too much time already, talking to me here by the hour!"

Tom grinned faintly. "May—may I take a bunch of these flowers—what do you call 'em?" he asked almost timidly.

"Oh, the larkspur. Take what you like," Alec replied, turning away to repress a smile.

The next day he met Tom at the post-office. Tom's face was a bit less glum. "She—she had three bunches of flowers in the house when I got home yesterday," the man confided. "I guess she had to use the chocolate pot to put one of 'em in. Do you suppose she'd like it if I bought her a vase?"

"I'm sure she would!" cried Alec. "I'm motoring

over to Bentford in the Doc's jitney to-day. Shall I pick one out for you?"

"If you'd get two, please," said Tom. "Pretty ones," he added.

He came for his vases late that afternoon, and gathered some flowers to put in them. Two days later it was Susan who came for flowers.

"Did you tell him to get the vases?" she asked.

"That is unworthy of you," Alec answered. "You know that Tom loves you, and you could tell from his manner whether the gift was his own."

Her face brightened. "Oh, I *wanted* to believe it!" she cried. "But it seemed so incredible. I'm going to keep those vases full!"

From time to time in the next few weeks Alec saw her in his garden, picking flowers, and not infrequently Tom came, also, after banking hours, to take blossoms home.

"I've been thinking over what you said about our parlour," he mused one day, "and since it's been lit up with these posies, I can kind of see you were right. Do you suppose I could afford one of those pictures young Eliot paints, some time, as a—a sort of present?"

"I might see Rob about it," Alec admitted. "He might make local rates."

A day or two later Tom carried home a framed oil

painting, a Southmead landscape. It was a sketch, to be sure, but the bright colours pleased him, and he recognized the scene, which pleased him more, and he felt a glow of sacrificial extravagance, for he had paid ten dollars. Ruth and Rob smiled with the Bird House Man at his innocence, for the picture would have been priced at one hundred.

Meanwhile Susan continued her lessons every other afternoon. Presently Alec went up again to the school, and saw her goldfinch dance, as it had developed under instruction. She had worked hard, and to good purpose. It was now a very pretty, if still a naïve dance, a swooping flight from flower to flower, ending in a flutter into the hiding of a distant thicket. He congratulated her, and then made the proposition he had been planning—that she should dance it in his garden, together with a dance or two around his pond by the other pupils of the school. A few select souls from the village were to be invited, and Tom—"as a part of his education," Alec smiled.

"He'll never come," said Susan. "He—he's trying so hard to be different. Sometimes it seems like old days again. But we never mention the dances. He can never forgive those. Or he can never forgive me for dancing them."

"Well, we'll try it, anyhow," the man said, and went ahead with the arrangements.

He caught Tom in his garden to invite him. "Tom," he said, "I'm giving a little entertainment here Saturday afternoon. Two or three of those best dancers are going to dance here, in this setting of flowers and water pool, and Mrs. Tommy Trask is going to play the music on her violin, hidden in the shrubbery. You have no idea of how lovely it will be, so I want you to come and see. You're a fair-minded man—at least, you often say you are—so I know you'll come and judge for yourself."

Tom's face grew hard. "Is—is my wife going to dance?" he asked.

"Yes, Tom, and you won't know her now. She's improved so."

"She's going to dance in that—that yellow thing, barefoot?"

"I believe so. Can't you be fair, can't you be just? Come and see it in its proper setting, with the music and the sympathetic audience. Come, Tom, and try to understand a little what your wife is trying to do. Until you do understand that, you'll go on living with a wall between you."

The man's brows were contracted. "I'll—I'll think it over," he said. "It's—it's hard. But I want to be fair. I want—I want my wife again!"

There was a rehearsal in the garden later that afternoon. The next day was Friday. Alec was hard at work in the morning when Susan came into the shop. Her face looked bright and cheerful. "I'm not going to dance Saturday," she announced.

"You're not *what*?" cried Alec.

"I'm not going to dance Saturday. Tom came home last night late. He'd been walking around in the fields across the river. I saw him out of the kitchen window. He said at supper he 'withdrew his objections' to my dancing, and was coming to see me. Poor man, I could see how hard it had been for him to say that, and how hard it would be for him to watch me! It's *me* that he objects to in that costume, really. He's—he's so old-fashioned. It's really because he loves me. I'm going to invent a new dance, and a new costume, and do it for him later."

Her words rushed on, and Alec watched her face. "But you wanted to give your dance to-morrow didn't you?" he asked.

"Of course I did, dreadfully," she replied, a little wistfully. "But if he backed down, I ought to back down a little, too, oughtn't I?"

"You have spoiled my entertainment, but you're a good child, and I love you," said the Bird House Man. "Bring your stupid old Tom to-morrow,

and sit among the spectators, then. We'll show him the best that remains."

Tom came, and sat with his wife. He found the Eliots there, and Dr. Tommy Trask and the president of his bank, and to his great surprise both his own pastor and the Episcopal rector. Little Miss Millie Tilton was also present, looking as if she was about to be shocked and was bracing for it.

But nobody was shocked. They all sat in the orchard, and from a source unseen came the lilt of a violin, and against the mirror of the pond, where the ducks and swans were floating, suddenly appeared three dancers like the figures on a Greek vase, and wove a living frieze on the grassy margin. In one dance they ran laughing into the shallow water, scattering the birds in terror. In another they sank at the end like tired lilies over the brim. It was really very lovely, in the low light of a summer afternoon, and when the little audience broke up and moved back through the flower garden to the veranda for tea, they were chattering enthusiastically. Only Tom was silent. At tea the dancers, conventionally clad, joined them. The youngest, a pretty, slender, enthusiastic miss of eighteen, cried: "Oh, Mr. Hall, what a pity your wife couldn't dance to-day, and she had it all rehearsed, too! She's learned quicker than any of us. You ought to be proud of her."

"I—I am," Tom stammered. "She—she's going to coach the high-school girls next winter, I believe."

Tom and Susan lingered after the rest had gone.

"She—she just didn't dance because she thought I didn't want her to, Alec," the man said, "after I'd told her I withdrew my objections. I try to be a fair man, and I guess she was trying to be fair, too. Marriage is a kind of a compromise, isn't it?"

"So they say," Alec replied. "But what did you think of the dances? That's what I want to hear."

"Well, they kind of made me think of a picture I saw somewhere once of Greek girls, I guess it was. I guess maybe I wasn't fair to them. I try to be fair."

"Don't try to be fair," said Alec, "try to be child-like. Try to see all the new and lovely things in the world you can. Now, go get your wife and tell her all the way home how much you liked the dances."

A week later Susan summoned Alec to her house. The parlour was full of flowers. Over Tom's vases on the mantel hung Rob Eliot's landscape, in vivid greens and blues. But that was the least of the transformation. Against the wall, beneath the old engraving of the Good Shepherd, stood a brand-new piano.

"Mine!" cried the woman. "It came yesterday afternoon. He'd never said a word to anybody. It was a complete surprise. And do you know what yesterday was?"

Alec shook his head.

"Our wedding anniversary," she answered. "He'd remembered that, too! I—I—well, I guess I cried."

"I hope you did," said the Bird House Man, "on his shoulder. That's the way to thank a man. It makes him feel fine and oaky. You owe him that concession to the old-fashioned male."

"I owe him many things," she said, turning away and touching a chord softly.

Tom appeared at the Bird House that afternoon. "I came to see when you start larkspurs and things for next year," he said.

"You seem to have started something already," said Alec. "I noticed a new piece of furniture in your house."

"Yes, and I got a good one!" cried Tom, turning red. "Alec, she—she's come back—upstairs, I mean! Oh, life has got right again!"

"Yes," said Alec, "because there's no cage now. Think of her always as a goldfinch, Tom. Every woman's soul has wings that long to beat against the blue. You can build 'em a nice little bird

house and invite 'em in, but don't put wires on the door."

"I—I think I'd like to begin with larkspur," Tom answered. "That's the first one I learned the name of."

CHAPTER X

THE PAMPERED FLEDGLING

ALEC FARNUM was walking in the Southmead cemetery, observing the grackles which bred in the numerous thick, aged pines and Norway spruces and made the otherwise peaceful spot noisy with their harsh calls, like the grate of an unoiled hinge. Alec liked the Southmead cemetery. It recalled to him the historic retort made by old Doctor Parker who lived in the white house at the edge, when somebody asked him if he wasn't afraid to take the short cut home through the graveyard at night. "Oh, no," said he, "everybody there owes me money." Alec liked especially the older corner, where the pines were the largest and the grackles the most numerous. He liked it not only for the quaint, mossy stones and still quainter inscriptions, but for the prim arrangement of the graves, each one laid east and west to a compass line, with the footstone toward the rising sun, in strict obedience to a literal faith in the resurrection of the body, so that when Gabriel's trumpet sounded on Resurrection morning every sleeper could awake and find himself faced properly

without confusion. It was easy to see, from the arrangement of later graves and the date of their inscriptions, when the decline in strict Calvinistic faith set in. Nor, as he paused by many a green mound and read the names on the stones, did Alec Farnum need any Spoon River anthologist to tell him the true stories. We carry fewer secrets to our graves, perhaps, than we think. At any rate, Alec had reached the years when the memory loves to play with the past, and a walk through the cemetery was, to him, like turning the pages of a *comédie humaine*.

On this particular June afternoon he smiled when he came upon two little girls having a dolls' tea party on the large table-stone which marked the last resting-place of Theophilus Weston, B 1741—D 1801. This stone was in the centre of a large lot, screened by a hemlock hedge and entered by a wrought-iron gate. The Westons had been the squires of the region, and they maintained a certain aloofness from the vulgar herd, enjoyed a decent privacy, even in death. But the two little girls felt nothing of this. They saw the stone only as a convenient table, and entering through the gate had set out their mimic china and more genuine cookies directly over the recumbent dignity of the original Theophilus, founder of the line. Alec passed the time of day with them, and walked on.

The Weston family was still in his mind when he spied, to his surprise, a present bearer of the name, Eunice Weston, walking down a path, with a young man beside her. They were engaged in earnest conversation, or at least the man seemed to be talking earnestly while the girl listened, and they walked slowly, their bodies close together. They walked, indeed, like two people in love. That in itself surprised Alec, and he was more surprised when he made out that the man was Will Stone, whose father ran the drug store and held the office of town clerk. Will, always an ambitious boy, had gone away to a technical college, earning most of his way through, and was now working for the telephone company in Pittsburgh. That much Alec knew. He also recalled that the father had told him Will was coming home soon for his annual vacation. But to find Will walking with Eunice Weston, and in the village cemetery, caused Alec to pucker his lips in an amused whistle.

"However," he said to himself, "far be it from me to spoil poor Eunice's fun. I guess she has little enough." And he turned back toward another part of the burial ground.

Meanwhile, the couple walked slowly on.

"I've got forty men under me, in my department," Will was saying. "Keeps me busy, all right, but it's great, too!"

"It must be great," said the girl, looking up at him with an admiration she could not quite conceal.

"Yes, it's great to have a department of your own, and it means more money, too. Say, if anybody'd told me when I was ladling out nut sundaes in dad's drug store summer vacations that in five years I'd be making enough to—to—to get married on, I'd have called him a liar!"

Will finished the sentence bravely, but then his courage seemed to ooze. He relapsed into silence, and the slender girl beside him, her pale cheeks flushed, was silent, too. They walked on thus to the end of the path, where they turned and began to retrace their steps.

"But—but doesn't it seem pleasant to get back to Southmead?" she asked presently, to break the pause.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Yes, it does, I guess. But I don't know if I can make you understand; you've never been away from here—to work, you know. Somehow all my past life here doesn't seem quite real now—it's like a dream. My life now is down there in that 'city of beautiful smoke,' as somebody called it. It really is beautiful sometimes, at night, especially, from the hills. I kind of feel this is just a long breath, and soon I'll be back again."

"How soon?" she asked in a low tone.

"A month," said he. "I wrote you that."

"Yes, you said you were to have a month's vacation, but I didn't know whether you'd spend it all here."

"Yes, you did," said he, facing her. "Say you did!"

She coloured, and averted her face with a happy smile, shaking her head.

"No," she answered. "How could I tell?"

His fingers sought hers, to press her hand, but she wouldn't let him touch her.

"I—I must be going home now," she declared. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she added bravely: "Come with me and have some tea. I—I don't like walking this way—in the cemetery."

"It's a custom hallowed by village tradition," said he.

"I'm afraid mother wouldn't think so," she answered. And the man's brow clouded.

They walked together up the street, and turned in at the gate of a large, gloomy house which stood back from the roadway, under several mournful and lofty hemlocks which cast a kind of green shadow on the ancient dwelling—or so it seemed. There was a flagstone walk from the gate to the porch, with grass in the cracks, and on either side

day lilies run wild. Close about the house the hemlock needles and the shade had killed all grass. As the young man advanced up the path, he felt a strange uneasiness settling on his spirit.

"This is the first time you've ever been in my house, isn't it?" Eunice asked, sensing his silence.

"No," he answered. "I've brought prescriptions here from the store."

He spoke sharply, perhaps, and the girl reproached him gently. "That's not quite fair of you, Will."

"I know it—forgive me!" he answered. "But you Westons *are* awfully uppish, you know."

"Yes—I know!" she said, and her own tone was bitter.

They entered a gloomy living-room which did not belie the promise—or the threat—of the exterior. Will, who was far from ignorant, noted that while some of the furniture was excellent old mahogany, more of it was mid-Victorian walnut. A large oil portrait of Theophilus the First occupied the place of honour over the mantel—a thin, hard face, he had, a Tory face Will thought. But perhaps that was imagination. He had no time to determine, for Mrs. Weston entered the room at the sound of voices, and stood looking in undisguised surprise at Will.

"You—you remember Will Stone, mother," said

Eunice. "He's home from Pittsburgh on his vacation. I thought we'd have some tea."

Mrs. Weston barely inclined her head. She was a large woman, of the sort who must inevitably lose seventy-five per cent. of their dignity when they remove their corsets. And she belonged to that class of New England female aristocrats who appear to be perpetually expecting a bad odour to assail their nostrils. Her dress, however, was in the latest mode, and she undeniably was handsome, in her way.

"Pittsburgh?" she said. "Are you in Pittsburgh? It must be a very dirty place."

"The industries there are rather more extensive than in Southmead," said Will.

"I dare say. The charm of Southmead is its lack of industrialism," the woman replied. "Did you say tea, Eunice? You know this is Lizzie's afternoon out."

"But I can get it, mamma," said the girl. "I won't be a jiffy. Excuse me, Will."

She hurried out of the room, not noticing her mother's glance at the "Will," though she might have felt it burning her back. Left alone with Mrs. Weston, the young man shifted uneasily in his chair

"I—I'm sorry Eunice is going to all this trouble," he said.

The glance was fixed on him this time. "My daughter doubtless does not so regard it," said the woman. "Neither, probably, does she know where the tea is."

Whereupon Mrs. Weston followed Eunice from the room. Will, his face hot, heard the sound of low but excited conversation from a distant room, and a moment or two later Eunice entered with a tea tray, her own face flushed. She was biting her lower lip to keep back the tears. Will sprang to meet her, and took the tray to a table. He tried to look into her face, but she would not let him. "How many lumps?" she said.

He had scarcely begun to drink his tea when the outer door opened, and a lurching step was heard in the hall. The girl half rose and put one hand to her bosom. "It's Theo," she whispered, as if to herself. "What's he doing home so soon?"

Will rose, too. "I shouldn't have come," he said. "I'd better be going now."

The girl listened to the steps, which were going up the stairs now. "No!" she cried. "You shan't go! You finish your tea!"

Will obediently sat down again, and timidly touched Eunice's fingers, patting them tenderly. She suddenly averted her face and the tears came. "Don't!" she whispered. "Please!"

She had hardly regained her composure when the steps once more lurched heavily on the stairs, descending this time, and a young man burst into the room. He was not much over thirty, but his face was older with dissipation, and he looked strangely like the portrait of Theophilus over the mantel—a Theophilus the worse for liquor. His mother was close behind him, laying a detaining hand on his arm. But he shook her off, and glared at his sister and Will.

“Hello, Theo,” said Will, as pleasantly as he could.

The drunken young man ignored the greeting, and continued to stare insolently.

“Tea party, eh?” he presently said. “Why don’t you have him serve soda water, Eunice?” With a chuckle at his wit, he lurched toward a chair, and steadied himself by the back.

Eunice’s face grew red and then deadly white. She walked over to her brother and faced him. “You go upstairs to your room, Theo,” she cried, “and don’t you dare to interfere in my affairs!”

“Hello, li’le shishter’s tellin’ me whatter do, is she?” he shouted. “Well, I won’ go upstairs, and I won’——”

His mother broke in sharply but coaxingly. “Come, Theo,” she said. “He’s going now. Come with mother, that’s a good boy. Come, dear.”

She put an arm about him, forcing him from the chair toward the door.

"Well, I damn well wan' to see him go!" cried Theo.

Will, who had been white and silent, took his hat.

"I share your sentiments, if not your profanity," he said. He turned to say good-bye to Eunice, but she was a heap in her chair, her face buried in her hands. Will walked past the mother and son and out of the door.

And just as he reached the sidewalk, his face still white, his hands clenched, his body trembling, he almost ran into Alec, strolling home from the cemetery.

"Hello!" cried the Bird House Man, putting out a hand. "Well, how's the Alexander Graham Bell of the twentieth century?"

Then he saw Will's face. "What's the trouble?" he added.

"I—I—no, I can't tell."

"Come," said Alec, linking an arm through his, "walk home with me and talk it out. You'll feel better than bottling it up. Perhaps I can help you. I've known Lucy Weston all my life. Did she treat you like a bad smell?"

"You—you're in her class. You can't understand," said Will.

"My boy, nobody's in her class, except perhaps God and the Prince of Wales. Don't let a little thing like that worry you, you've got such a majority on your side."

"Oh, it isn't that!" cried Will.

"I knew it wasn't. Come, wait till we get a pitcher of lemonade on my veranda, and our pipes going, and then you'll tell me."

Will, still burning from the insult, did tell him; but he added, "Poor Eunice!"

Alec took a long pull at his pipe before he spoke. "Poor Eunice, indeed," he finally said. "The rest of your story, while interesting, is unimportant, if you'll excuse my saying so. One can't seriously resent insults from a drunken puppy. And as for Lucy Weston, she's been exhibiting her bad manners till they're notorious. That's how a lot of people know she's an aristocrat. I'm sorry for her, though. She was Eliot Weston's cousin, and cousins have no business to marry, especially when they already think their precious family is so important. I've never known such a union that didn't produce at least one mealy-faced, anæmic snob. But of course Lucy's absurd petting of that pup of hers spoiled him. He's a pampered fledgling. She didn't even make him go through college after he got in trouble his freshman year at Harvard—sided with him

against the faculty. I believe now he pretends to go down to the mills in North Benton which his uncle runs, but he spends all his time at the Riley House—he just a plain bum, headed for cirrhosis of the liver and a hot grill in Hell. You saw the merry little dinner companion who comes home to cheer up mother and sister every night. Pleasant thought, isn't it? Of course, his foolish mother always was a snob, but she's acquired considerable of her uppishness in self-defence—it's a kind of pathetic armour against the sneers of the world. I'm a bit sorry for her, Will. But I'm sorriest for poor Eunice—a nice, sweet girl, Eunice, who's never had half a chance. It was always Theo first, and mother second in that house, and Eunice running a bad third. There are the facts, in good, middle-class English—lower middle at that!"

Alec paused and looked sharply at his companion, as if waiting for him to speak.

"It—it's horrible!" Will answered.

Alec's eyes were still on him. "Do you know Eunice well?" he asked.

"N—not very. Of course, I knew her when we were kids—Sunday-school and all. But I always thought of her as kind of belonging to another world from mine. You know how it is with us village people. Last summer, though, when I was home on

vacation, I met her out walking one day, and we went quite a ways, and got on pretty well, and went walking some more, and she and I wrote to each other this winter some, and——”

He broke off abruptly.

“And now your little adventure in her house has jarred your pride, eh, and made you hot against—against *all* of ’em?”

“Something like that, I suppose,” Will admitted lamely.

“I repeat, poor Eunice!” said Alec. “My boy, I was never noted for my ability to mind my own business. I’m giving a dinner party to-morrow night. You are invited. Seven o’clock. Go along home now and see if you can’t write a note to Eunice that will make her feel better. Send it round by messenger this evening. You rather owe it to her, you know.”

He patted the young man on the shoulder and went into the house to break the news of his party to Mrs. Plumb.

The guests were to be Ruth and Rob Eliot, who had arrived for the summer, and Dr. Thomas Trask and his wife who was instructed to bring her violin, and Miss Millie Tilton. Alec had no trouble rounding them up early that evening. Then he walked to the gloomy house at the end of the flag-

stone path, and rang the bell. There was a light in the living-room. Mrs. Weston was seated there, with a book, alone. She had on an embroidered black silk tea gown, and a heavy gold bracelet jangled on her bare arm as she put out her hand to the caller.

"Don't you find Galsworthy's style fascinating?" she asked, tapping the book in her lap.

"I might if I'd read him," Alec admitted judiciously. "Is Eunice at home? I wanted to invite her to a little young folks' party I'm giving to-morrow."

"She's in her room with a headache," Mrs. Weston replied. "I dare say she'd see you, though, if you'd be good enough to pull the bell cord."

Alec tweaked the long, tasselled cord which hung beside the marble mantel, as in a stage set for a French drama, and far off somewhere a bell tinkled faintly.

"Lizzie, tell Miss Eunice Mr. Farnum would like to see her," said the mother. "Rap quietly on her door."

"Theo retired early to-night," she added to Alec, who made no reply.

When Eunice came into the room, he saw at once that she had been suffering, and he put both his hands over hers, looking her steadily in the eyes.

"Come to invite you to a little dinner party at my

shack to-morrow," he said. "Sort of a celebration of Ruth and Rob's return for the summer. There'll be some music—songs and things. Margaret Trask is going to bring her violin. Seven o'clock."

"I—I——" Eunice hesitated, not wishing to hurt his feelings.

He still had her hand in his, and gave it a little squeeze, meanwhile, with his back to Mrs. Weston, winking solemnly at her.

She dropped her eyes and coloured. "I—I—you won't need me, will you, mother?" she said.

"Not if you're such a help to me as you've been this evening," her mother answered petulantly. "I've had to read to myself, and it hurts my eyes dreadfully."

"But think of the style!" said Alec maliciously, as he slipped out.

There was no formality at Alec Farnum's dinners. When he and Dr. Tommy Trask weren't teasing little Miss Millie across the table, or Alec wasn't telling a story, or Rob Eliot wasn't riding one of his hobbies with his ingratiating enthusiasm, the host led Will to talk of Pittsburgh, to bring him into the circle, or told Eunice with great gusto how he'd seen two little girls having a tea party above the aristocratic remains of Theophilus the First.

"Isn't he committing *lèse majesté*, Miss Weston?"

Doctor Trask inquired slyly. "Shall I throw something at him?"

"What's the use?" she laughed. "He has no reverence for the great traditions. As long as he likes me, I don't care what he says about my ancestors. I'd like to forget my ancestors, anyhow," she added, more seriously.

Alec saw Will dart a covert look at her, and he hoped he put out a hand beneath the tablecloth.

So the dinner went gayly on, and afterward Ruth sang, to her husband's accompaniment, while the rest had their coffee on the veranda the other side of the glass doors, and after that Margaret took her violin and went down into the garden, followed by the others. There was no moon, and the light from the house did not penetrate far. But, under the stars, the sanded paths were visible, and the white flowers.

"Go lose yourselves, you boob," Alec laughed into Will's ear. "Come, Millie," he said, aloud, "let's you and I go off into a corner and get sentimental while Margaret plays."

"Alec, I'll slap you in a minute," the little woman giggled.

Will and Eunice had slipped away before the wail and throb of the violin rose out of the scented darkness. Margaret loved to play in the dark, and for

nearly half an hour she kept on, invisible, while the guests, invisible, too, whispered softly or thought their own thoughts. It was music as Alec loved it best, and he smiled happily when, at the close, he saw Will and Eunice drawing near the veranda light, their faces strangely happy.

"Stay behind—I want to see 'you two,'" he whispered as the rest were going.

He went across the yard with Miss Millie, to her door, and returned to stand smiling down at the pair who sat together in the swing seat on his porch.

Will rose. "Mr. Farnum," he said, "I've asked Eunice to marry me."

"Hooray!" cried Alec.

"But—but—she——"

"What's the matter, Eunice? Don't you love him? Pittsburgh's not such a bad place—after you get used to it," said Alec.

The girl looked up, first at one man and then at the other. She seemed curiously frail in the half light, and Alec noted again how much less elegantly dressed she was than her mother. Her face was working miserably. "I—I love him," she said simply. "I think he's splendid. But—but—how can I leave mother all alone here? And—and how can I go through what I'd have to go through? Oh, you don't know—you can't know!"

Alec drew a chair over close to them, and sat down. "I knew your family before you were born, Eunice," he said. "I used to play with your father directly under the portrait of Theophilus the Great. But that's hardly to the point. The first point is that Will loves you, and you love Will, isn't it?"

"Yes," they both agreed.

"Well," he continued, "that, after all, is the great thing, the greatest thing in the world. If you don't know what to do under the circumstances, my dear, I'd be inclined to doubt if you really love him."

"Oh, no!" she cried, close to tears. "I do, I do!"

"Then your first duty is to go to him, to go with him. To have any doubts about that is to question your love for him."

"You make it sound so simple," she said.

"It is simple. It is as simple as a bird's flight in the spring. 'I am my beloved's and he is mine.' It is the law of life. Far be it from me to decry the beauties or the duties of sacrifice. But I've seen sacrifice carried to a point where it becomes a vice, only too often, in our corner of the land. Your mother, after all, can afford to get somebody else to read Galsworthy to her. I doubt if you read very well, anyhow!"

"I don't," said Eunice, with a weak little laugh.

"She does, too!" cried Will.

Alec smiled. "Come, what is your real reason?" he demanded.

"I—I don't dare tell mother. She—she'll tell Theo," the girl muttered miserably. "He—he's getting worse all the time. Oh, it's awful to have to confess such things about one's own family! But he and mother both will say I can't marry Will, and Theo'll make a dreadful scene, and if we tried to have a wedding, he'd break it up somehow. Oh, he's capable of it when he's not—not himself! I couldn't stand that. Oh, why was I ever born! An hour ago when Will said he loved me, I was so happy, so happy! I didn't think of what it meant till we came back to the lights."

She buried her face in her hands and her shoulders shook. Will put his arm about her, his own face working.

But Alec merely rubbed his hands. "A great idea!" he said. "You shall be married in my garden, with Ruth as your bridesmaid and Margaret to play the wedding march, and at the last moment we'll invite your mother to give you away. If she won't, I will. How soon can you get ready?"

Eunice looked up, startled. "Oh, I couldn't do that!" she cried. "A girl ought to be married from her own house, or her church. And—and all the

Westons have been married in that front room—under the portrait.”

“Oh, damn the portrait, and all the Westons!” Alec exclaimed, sharply. “Eunice, I’m losing patience with you. If you don’t love Will enough to marry him in the middle of the Bronx Zoo, you don’t love him at all. You’re just a trifle, and you deserve to go back to your precious portrait, and Will deserves a better girl, a real, energetic, look-things-in-the-face, middle-class girl, and not an aristocrat with what Howdy Parker calls lemonade for blood.”

He watched the effect of his words, and saw Eunice stiffen up.

“I—I’ll do it!” she said. “I’ll show you whether I love Will or not!”

“You darling!” cried Will, and kissed her.

“But how can we be sure Theo won’t break up the wedding, even here?” she added, with a return of trouble. “Mother’ll tell him as soon as she knows.”

“I will guarantee protection,” said Alec grimly.

No one but Ruth and Rob Eliot were let into the secret. There was little time to prepare, for the wedding was set for the following week, but Ruth took Eunice in hand, and helped her with her clothes. Rob drove them in his little car to Hampton, a small city twenty miles away, where they shopped madly

one afternoon, and in the next days Eunice spent all the time she could in Ruth's room, where the manufacturing process was going on.

"It's pathetic," Ruth told Alec one evening. "Of course, I always knew Mother Weston wore all the clothes and demanded all the admiration in that house—but I never knew how much of the money that worthless Theo got, and how little was ever done for poor Eunice. Oh, it's so New England! Everything for the boy! Why, after I'd got her dress pinned to-day, I just thought I'd try her hair a different way, so I fixed it up more becoming, and stuck in one of my combs, and led her to the glass—and she just broke down and cried. She said nobody'd ever done that for her in her life! I pretty nearly cried, too. If Will Stone isn't good to her, he deserves to be shot."

"He'll be good to her, never fear," said Alec. "By the way, tell Rob I want him at the house two hours before the wedding, without fail, before that noon train from North Benton gets in."

That Mrs. Weston did not guess something untoward was afoot during those days of preparation either shows conclusively her self-absorption, or proves that Eunice developed sudden unexpected powers of defensive deception—perhaps it proves a little of both. Theo was rather worse than usual

that week, demanding much of his unfortunate mother's attention. That may have aided, too. Eunice avoided him all she could, shrinking from his sneering allusions to her "soda clerk beau," and looking to her mother for a protection she did not receive.

But on the fateful morning, after Theo had departed on the train for North Benton, she stole into her mother's room, hesitating, fearful, wistfully yearning for love and sympathy, and stammered out her confession—that she was to be married that afternoon in Alec Farnum's garden.

"And, oh, mother, you *will* give me away, won't you?" she cried. "You must, mother, you must!"

She sank at her mother's knees, and laid entreating arms across them.

The woman lifted the sewing she was engaged upon out from under her daughter's arms and testily smoothed it, before she replied.

"You are *not* going to be married to that Stone person in Alec Farnum's garden, or anywhere else!" she said. "I'd thank Alec Farnum to mind his own business! It's just like him. Eunice, you won't leave this house to-day! I forbid it!"

Suddenly she rose, flinging off the girl's arm from her lap, and started toward the door.

But the girl was quicker than she. Her pale face

had gone paler, and the entreaty left her eyes. They were flashing now as she blocked the way.

"I'm afraid, mother, that I've passed the age when you can forbid me," she said. "I hoped—you'll never know how I hoped—that you'd come to my wedding—you, my own mother! But at least I expect to be there myself."

With a darting motion she reached the door, snatched the key, slammed the door behind her, and forcing it to stay shut with all her strength against her mother's weight, turned the lock on the outside. Then, panting, she ran to her own room, where her bag was packed (most of her things she had contrived to smuggle over to Ruth's during the week), put on her hat, slipped the key of her mother's room into her water pitcher, seized the bag, and fled down the stairs. Her mother was pounding the door now, and Lizzie was hurrying from the kitchen.

"Mother is locked in," she said. "You'll find the key somewhere in the house." And, leaving the astonished domestic gaping after her, she ran down the path and hurried up the road to Ruth's.

But her mother did not follow her. Doubtless it took Lizzie some time to find the key! In Ruth's chamber, the other girl's arms about her, Ruth's baby chattering in the garden below as he dug in a sand pile, she regained some composure, and was

even tempted to drink a cup of tea before she was dressed in her pretty new travelling frock, the choicest frock she had ever possessed. It was all of Ruth's designing, and seemed to take five years off her age. But, even in her bridal clothes, she sat during the hour before the wedding, while Ruth dressed, anything but the happy bride-to-be.

Meanwhile Rob Eliot had followed instructions and gone to the Bird House two hours in advance.

"This silence is ominous. Something is going to happen," said Alec. "Do you see that coil of rope in the corner? There's a free noose on the end. Also a large bandanna beside it. Note their position well, please. We may need 'em."

Rob grinned. "I get you," he answered.

They sat at the window, and waited.

"Here he comes now!" Rob suddenly exclaimed.

"And sober, too!" said Alec. "Watch out for squalls."

Theo Weston did not even knock on the door, he opened it and strode into the room.

"You——" he began.

"People usually knock when they come to my house," said Alec quietly.

"Damn you, I'll knock in a way you'll not like before I'm through! Look here, my mother tells me you've butted into our family affairs and my

sister's going to be married here this afternoon. Well, she's not, see? You're going to send home your damn parson, and I'm going to take home my sister."

"Am I? And are you?" said Alec. "That would be interesting, if true."

"You'll find out whether it's true. Do you think I'm going to let my sister marry that damn soda clerk? Do you think I'm going to have him for a brother-in-law?"

"An alliance with soda would be strange for you, wouldn't it?" Alec suggested.

The young man seemed about to spring at him, and Rob intervened. But Alec waved Rob aside.

"He won't hit me till he's told us what he's going to do if we don't send home the parson," Alec smiled.

"I'll—I'll—by God, I'll——"

His voice rose almost to a yell, and a man passing in a wagon looked quickly toward the house. At the same time, his hand went toward his pocket.

Alec, with the quickness of a cat, a quickness his big frame did not suggest, grabbed the youth's wrist with an iron grip. "Time now, Rob," he said, as Theo swung at him with his free arm. Alec warded off the blow, and before another could come, the noose was around both his arms, and an instant later the coils were wrapping him to his feet. He

started to shout, and Alec, with a smile, yanked the gag around his face.

"Now, let's see what he's got," he said.

Bob felt in the suspicious pocket and drew out an automatic.

The Bird House Man shook his head sadly. "Drunk, after all," he said. "Drunk and crazy. Poor fellow!"

He tossed the pistol into a drawer, and then he and Rob, picking up the rope-wound figure, carried it into the cellar, tied it into an old broken chair for further precaution, made sure the gag couldn't work loose, and returned to the library.

Alec was shaking his head still. "A pistol!" he repeated. "I never thought it would come to that. Poor, poor fellow!"

"He'll have to be sent somewhere for treatment," Rob exclaimed. "Why, he's not safe at large."

"He'll have to be watched, surely. Whew! That was more than I bargained for. But we've got to get Eunice out of this, anyhow. Come, come, let's wash up and straighten our ties! They say everything's fair in love and war."

"Which is this?" Rob laughed.

"Hanged if I know!" said Alec.

There was no one at the wedding but the minister, Margaret Trask, Will's father, Alec, Rob, and Ruth.

Ruth walked over with Eunice. The rest had arrived casually, and no suspicion had been aroused.

"Did—did mother come?" Eunice whispered to the Bird House Man.

He shook his head. "No, but probably Theo wouldn't let her. Never mind, dear. Remember, it's Will that counts now."

"And Theo?" She glanced about like a frightened animal.

"I can give you my solemn oath he'll not disturb us."

So Eunice, very pale, leaned on Alec Farnum's arm and walked up the path to the hidden throb of Margaret's violin, to meet Will Stone who stood with Rob and the minister beneath a trellis riotous with Dorothy Perkins roses. It was a hushed and solemn wedding, but when the last words were spoken and Eunice put her lips to Will's, a song sparrow in a tree close by suddenly pealed out a cascade of notes, and Alec smiled.

A moment later a car came up the drive, and Will laughed gayly.

"From Hampton!" he cried. "We're going out in style. We'll catch a train somewhere, some time—but not at Southmead station!"

Alec kissed Eunice, and she clung to him like a child. She clung longer to Ruth, running back

twice to kiss her, and then, while Mrs. Plumb suddenly appeared and hurled an old shoe from the kitchen door, the motor moved out of the yard and disappeared up the road, away from the village. The guests departed, all but Ruth and Rob.

"Rob and I have one job left," said Alec to Ruth. "You run along, too."

The two men descended to the cellar and brought Theo up again. They stood him in the hall, removed the gag, and cut the rope. Then, as he stood free and wheeled on them, Alec said quietly: "Theo, you'd better go before you speak. You did a very foolish, a very rash, a very dangerous thing here this afternoon. Your father and I were old friends. I don't want to be any more ashamed of his son than I am now!"

The young man opened his lips, but no word passed them. He suddenly strode out and down the steps.

"Now you can go, too, Rob," said Alec.

"I don't like to, Uncle Alec. He might come back."

"No," the Bird House Man smiled. "He won't. But his mother will. That's more terrifying but less dangerous."

She did not come till evening, when the darkness made her visit less conspicuous. Her mouth was set in a thin, straight line, and her eyes were blazing.

"I've come to settle a few scores with you, Alec Farnum!" she said, in a taut voice that sounded like a wire stretched almost to the snapping point.

Alec motioned her to a seat, but she scorned it.

"First, can you give me any reason why I shouldn't have you arrested for locking my son up in your dirty cellar? Assault and battery, I believe they call it."

"Yes, Lucy, I can give you several reasons," the man replied. "But please sit down."

She stamped her foot angrily. "Go on, give them!" she cried. "But I tell you now, I'm going to have you arrested, anyway. First my own daughter locks me for an hour in my chamber, while she elopes with a village nobody, and then you kidnap my son! A pretty state of affairs! And it's all your doing."

Alec couldn't repress a chuckle. "Eunice did that?" he exclaimed. "Delicious!"

"Don't add to your insults, please," the woman said.

"I beg your pardon," Alec apologized. "I couldn't help a certain amusement at the changes love wrought in meek little Eunice. Lucy, I want to talk with you. You make it very difficult, standing up that way."

"Oh, very well," she snapped, sitting abruptly on the edge of the stiffest chair. "Now say your say."

"I played mud pies and marbles with Theo's father," Alec went on. "I went to college in the same class with him. I tramped through Switzerland with him. Perhaps I may be pardoned a natural interest in his family."

"If I hadn't thought so, I'd hardly be here now," said Mrs. Weston.

"Exactly. Well, Lucy, I plead guilty to all you charge me with. I meddled in your affairs. I gave my dinner party to let Will Stone have a chance to ask Eunice to marry him, a chance he couldn't get in her own mother's house—you know best why. People like Will Stone have their pride, too, Lucy, strange as it may seem. Having no ancestors, they take pride in themselves and their ambitions and accomplishments. Not a bad substitute, really."

The woman sniffed. "We won't discuss *him*."

"But he's rather necessary to the plot," Alec smiled. "More than giving him the chance to propose, and furnishing a violin obbligato, I screwed Eunice's resolution up to the point of accepting him, and when she didn't dare tell you and ask to have the wedding in her own mother's house, I offered her mine. I thought my garden was a better

place than the city clerk's office in Hampton Don't you, Lucy?"

The woman made no reply.

"I did all this because I wanted to see Eliot Weston's little girl happy. Will Stone's a fine, ambitious, honourable fellow, and Eunice loved him. She hasn't your acute sense of Weston superiority, Lucy. I'm afraid you took so much time imparting that to Theo that you rather neglected the girl child."

"Aren't you wandering from the subject, Alec?" the woman asked icily.

"Wandering *toward* it," he smiled. "Now we come to Theo. I won't mince matters with you. You must have telegraphed him to come home by the noon train when you heard of the wedding. You wanted him to stop it, because you didn't want to make a public scene yourself."

"I wanted him to stop it because he's my son—he's the male Weston of our line," the woman answered, with a touch of pathetic dignity. "It was his place to stop it."

Alec looked at her keenly, and pityingly, too.

"Lucy," he said, "I've got to hurt you. We've come to serious matters. It isn't serious that Eunice has married the man she loves. You'll get one of those trained-nurse companions, and never miss her

in a month. It would only have been serious if she hadn't married, but broken her heart, instead. But Theo we have with us still. When you sent him here to stop the wedding, did you tell him how to do it? And was he sober?"

"He went straight from the train," she answered weakly. "I got him on the telephone in the morning, as soon as I could get out of my room, and he promised me to—to behave. I—I trusted his being a Weston would tell him what to do."

Obviously she was worried to hear what he had done, and Alec paused thoughtfully before he spoke again.

"No, it's no use blinking facts," he said after a moment. Opening the drawer, he took out the automatic and let it fall with a metallic thud on the desk. "Your son came into my house with that in his pocket," he continued, as the mother shrank back with a horrified exclamation.

"Oh, it was just bluff!" she cried. "He wouldn't have used it, he wouldn't have used it!"

"Hardly a safe thing to bluff with for people whose fingers habitually tremble from liquor," said Alec grimly. "Your son had been drinking before he came here. I thought we'd all feel a little more comfortable if he were put in a secluded spot till the ceremony was over. Are you still angry with me for doing it?"

He looked at the woman, who had shrunk back into the chair, the look of horror still on her face. He realized that Eunice had gone completely from her mind. Her thoughts now were all on her son.

"Oh, Alec," she moaned, "he never meant to use it! What shall I do? What *can* I do for him?"

"I can tell you what you could have done, more easily," the Bird House Man replied. "You brought him up a pampered fledgling. You condoned his weaknesses and you put no iron into him. You never trained his will. But to-day, Lucy, he's sick, he's sick of body and of soul. You need a wiser doctor than I."

"But for his father's sake you'll help me," the woman said. "He's my son. He's all I've got!" Her wrath was gone, and all her haughtiness. She sat before him in pleading misery.

"I don't know what to say," Alec answered honestly. "A terrific attack of repentance, a Salvation Army conversion, is what he really needs. Howdy Parker says no man can be reformed who doesn't want to reform."

"You are not comparing my son with Howdy Parker?" the woman demanded, with a touch of her habitual manner.

"Only with apologies to Howdy," it was on Alec's lips to answer but he refrained. "Psychology

knows no class distinctions, Lucy," he replied. "You must get Theo's poor, weak will on the right side first, for it's that alone which can win the fight. And the liquor has got to be boiled out of him somehow, by a doctor who knows about such matters. He needs work, too, real physical work, and the right companions. Perhaps on a ranch out West, or an Arctic expedition——"

"You mean, send him away from me?" she exclaimed.

"From the Riley House, and this bluff at working he now goes through, at any rate," said Alec. "Lucy, you don't really love even Theo. You love yourself."

"You shan't talk to me that way!"

"As you like." He shrugged his shoulders. "I think I've meddled enough with the house of Weston."

He let the automatic drop noisily back into the drawer, and slammed the drawer shut again with an air of finality.

The woman rose at the noise, with a shudder. "Pardon me, Alec," she said humbly. "I *do* love my son. Will—will you help me to find the right doctor? I'll—I'll do whatever he says, if it breaks my heart."

Alec took her hand. "Of course," he answered

gently. "I'll begin the search to-morrow. And let us hope it mends Theo's heart instead of breaking yours."

Then he saw her to the door.

He came back into his study, sighed wearily, and lit his pipe.

"Thank God," he said aloud, "Eunice married into the middle classes!"

CHAPTER XI

THE WHIP-POOR-WILL

“HOWDY, Alec.”

“Howdy Howdy,” answered Alec Farnum, glancing up from his work-bench to the figure that stood in the shop door. “Come in out of the rain, Howdy,” he added, “if you know enough to!”

The man gesticulated toward the garden. “‘Thou waterest the ridges thereof abundantly; Thou settlest the furrows thereof, Thou makest it soft with showers,’” he quoted, with unction. “Fine month, April.”

As he stepped into the shop, his dirty old brown leather coat and still older corduroy trousers dripping, Alec caught the stinging smell of whiskey, but he gave no sign. “Been fishing yet, Howdy?” he asked.

“Well, it’s April the second, ain’t it?” the man replied, removing a battered felt hat and shaking the water from the brim. His hair was thin and shot with gray, and the stubble of beard on his thin cheeks was gray, too, and his nose betrayed his proclivities. But with his hat off, if you looked at him carefully,

you saw that his forehead was fine, and that his pale-blue eyes were clear and far-seeing, the eyes of a woodsman.

"The ice went out early this year. There ought to be some good trout," Alec hazarded.

"You might think so," answered the man. "Still, every brook's fished to death these days. Fishing ain't what it was when you 'n' I were kids, Alec, 'n' hooked trout off the railroad bridge."

"We aren't what we were then, either, Howdy," Alec said, giving the other a keen look.

"Wilt Thou break a leaf driven to and fro? And wilt Thou pursue the dry stubble?" the man answered dryly.

He put his hat down on a bench, slowly plunged a hand into one of the capacious pockets of his leather coat, and brought it forth grasping the shining, speckled body of a twelve-inch trout. He laid the fish on the bench, and plunged into the pocket again, bringing out another trout. A third followed, and then as many from the other outer pocket, and finally half a dozen more from some mysterious space between the lining and the leather.

"There's a few'll make you a mess or two," said he. "I kinder thought you might have a hankering for a taste o' trout, now the streams are runnin'. If you were half the man you once was you wouldn't

be in here makin' dinky houses for the little birdies. You'd be up Roaring Brook with a rod."

Alec laughed as he picked up one of the cool, glistening fish from the bench and held it lovingly in his hand. "I don't seem to need to while you're on the job, Howdy," he replied.

"Hell," said Howdy, "a man don't ketch 'em to eat! You're one of those 'whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly.'"

"Maybe so." Alec laughed again. "Still, are you going to help get my garden started this month? I'm needing some extra help."

"I'm needing a bit o' coin," said Howdy. "The old keg's pretty near empty."

"To-morrow?"

"O.K. So long, Alec."

"So long, Howdy."

The tall, lank figure slouched out into the spring shower again, and Alec presently took the fish in to Mrs. Plumb, his housekeeper, reserving four nice ones, however, which he put on a plate and carried over to Miss Millie Tilton, his approach being heralded by the excited barking of Siegfried.

Miss Millie received them in a flutter of delight, which was somewhat dashed when she learned who had caught them.

"That—that *drunk*!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, not a drunk, Millie," said Alec. "You must learn to make nicer distinctions. I don't think I ever saw Howdy Parker drunk."

"Well, *I* never saw him sober."

"That may be, but you never saw him drunk, either. He's merely perpetually mellowed."

"He's a disgrace to the name he bears," Miss Millie sniffed. "Think who his father was—the most respected doctor in this county! Howard might have gone to college as you did, Alec; I guess the old doctor left enough for that. And, instead, he just drank it all up, and lives in that—*that hovel* out there on the Muddy Brook Road, and just works enough to buy himself rum! It makes me *so* mad whenever I think of him!"

"He reads his Bible," Alec smiled.

"Humph!" the little spinster sniffed. "Reads his Bible, yes, and swears when he's quoting it, and never sets foot in a church!"

"He has a real reverence for it, though," Alec replied, "if not an orthodox reverence. He reverences its beauty, and he quotes the Psalms sometimes with the same expression I've seen on his face when he was listening to the wind in the pines, or the falls of Roaring Brook. Life is a funny thing, Millie, as many people have observed. Soberness and industry, while they are most estimable qualities,

do not always make for charm. Take the case of —no, we'll mention no names. On the other hand, poor old Howdy, in his hermit's shack out there by Muddy Brook, pleasantly pickled, with a pocket full of fish, sitting by the door in the twilight and playing his piccolo, always reminds me of a whip-poor-will on the village edge, a brown, homely, wistful whip-poor-will. And I've a soft spot in my heart for whip-poor-wills."

"You've too many soft spots in your heart, Alec," said Miss Millie sagely.

"But none for your abominable Bologna!" Alec suddenly roared. "That beast was scratching up my early peas this morning. If it happens again, into the sausage machine he goes!"

And he slammed out of the house, leaving the little woman grinning behind him

But he thought more than once of Howdy in the next few days, as the lank, brown form worked in his garden. Alec was busy with some bird-box orders, and could not work in the garden himself, greatly to his regret, but he went out frequently to give directions. Howdy, he could not help noticing, was visibly aging. Alec and he had been boys together, but he looked the older man now by at least ten years.

"Whiskey and loneliness," thought Alec, and

wondered again, as he had wondered so many times in the past, if there were nothing he could do to alter Howdy's mode of life. Certainly he could if anybody. In fact, he alone of the Southmead people with whom Howdy should normally have associated still treated him as if he were old "Doc" Parker's son. And it was to Alec alone that Howdy ever spoke in terms of intellectual intercourse. He had a certain rough comradeship of the woods with the boys and men who hunted or fished, and with the poachers; but even with them he was reserved. And in his intercourse with the village people he had developed a certain ironic and defiant scornfulness which irritated everybody, as he probably meant it should. He particularly enjoyed quoting Scripture to the pious. Once more Alec shook his head at the hopelessness of the task. The man was a born solitary, an anarchist like Thoreau—without Thoreau's genius. And yet Alec could not help being vaguely troubled by the recollection that when he left Southmead as a youth, to go to college and then to study and travel abroad for three or four years, he had left Howdy, the companion of his boyhood expeditions in the woods, a high-hearted, romantic youngster—and had returned to find him, as Miss Millie would say, a drunk. He had often speculated on the transition process which must have

taken place, and for which the village could assign no reason but natural cussedness and the money his father left him. But Alec's few attempts to draw a revelation from Howdy himself had met with such a reception that he had long ago abandoned them. Yet the man was so evidently aging now! He so evidently needed to knock off on the whiskey, and probably to have better food, and at more regular hours! Alec was troubled by him, and let his work stand still while he watched, from the door of his shop, the spare brown figure cultivating the rose beds, his dirty old felt hat pushed back from his fine forehead which had begun to show the hollows in the temples.

Alec went out into the fields and woods a day or two later, to look for myrtle warblers, the first of the large and intricate warbler family to migrate. He was proposing that spring to carry on his study of warblers, especially of their migration habits, and if possible to enlarge his list of varieties which passed through Southmead and its vicinity. But he had not forgotten Howdy, and toward twilight he bent his steps around the hill beyond Muddy Brook, and came down into the flats near Howdy's cabin. Muddy Brook flowed sluggishly through alders and open patches of meadow grass, and the redwing blackbirds were darting about. The road which

bordered the swamp was little used, leading only to one or two outlying farms. Howdy's cabin, a small, two-room affair which he had built himself long years ago, was gray against the hillside birches, for it was perched a hundred feet from the road, on the upper side. A thin column of smoke was ascending straight up from the fieldstone chimney for a long distance, and then feathering out like the ghost of a capital T. This smoke was tinged faintly salmon with sunset. As Alec drew near he heard the reedy notes of Howdy's piccolo, quaintly appropriate to this lonesome spot and the sad, quiet end of day.

A dog suddenly barked, the music stopped, and both Howdy and the dog appeared in the door.

"Howdy, Howdy," Alec called, "and howdy, Spot."

"Howdy, Alec," said the man, with no sign of surprise.

The dog, an ancient setter, recognizing the visitor, stopped barking and began to wag his tail.

"Just getting supper," said Howdy. "Come in and hev some?"

"Believe I will. You don't happen to have a telephone, so I can square myself with Mrs. Plumb, do you?"

"I ain't got a telephone, and I ain't got a million dollars, nor a butler in buttons, either," Howdy re-

plied. "Let Mrs. Plumb wait. 'They also serve who only stand and wait.'"

"That's not from the Bible," Alec laughed, stepping into the cabin.

"It's not so far from it, at that," said Howdy. "Old Milton was soaked in Scripture. I'm that much like Milton."

The room which Alec had entered was a quaint place. The walls, neither plastered nor papered, were of well-fitted but rough, unpainted boards. Upon them hung half a dozen old steel engravings, The Marriage of Pocahontas, The First Prayer in Congress, and others which Alec remembered had once hung in old Doctor Parker's house. Against one wall was a beautiful mahogany clawfoot settle with frayed, moth-eaten, green upholstery. The centre table, beneath a cheap brass lamp suspended from the ceiling, was also mahogany. There were two battered Chippendale chairs. In the centre of the end wall was a huge fireplace, and at one side of it a rusty sink with pails of water on a rough board bench, and a few cooking dishes hung on pegs. On the other side was a small battered range, which communicated with the chimney by a crooked stovepipe. A corner cupboard, also of mahogany, with several broken panes in the doors, contained a quaint array of old blue china, cheap white ware,

whiskey bottles, and fishing tackle. A small book-case full of books completed the furniture. There was a door into Howdy's sleeping-room. He went through this door and came back with three eggs and half a loaf of bread.

"That's my pantry," he said. "Cooler in there. Sit down, Alec. 'Tain't often my humble abode is honoured by the rich and great."

Alec sat down, and the dog came and laid his muzzle on the visitor's knee, looking up into his face with wistful setter eyes. Howdy bustled about in silence. From a drawer beneath the cupboard he produced a quaint old leather box, plush lined, and from it he extracted silver spoons and a knife and fork. These he carried to the sink, with an old blue china plate, cup, and saucer, and carefully washed them all, bringing them back to the table. Then he began the making of an omelette and the frying of bacon, two operations he carried on simultaneously with great deftness. The loaf of baker's bread he put on a blue platter in the centre of the table, took the iron kettle from the coals in the fireplace and filled the teapot, and then, with an angular gesture meant to be magnificent, invited Alec to the groaning board.

"Ye may eat and drink at my table, in my kingdom," said he.

"I consider it an honour," said Alec.

"At least, it's something few do," Howdy replied dryly. "If I hadn't been grubbing all the week in your silly garden, I'd have had some nice fried trout for you."

"But this omelette is delicious. Where'd you get the eggs?"

"You didn't know I kept hens, did you?"

"No," said Alec.

"Well, I don't."

"Why do you try to fool me?" Alec laughed at him. "You know you never stole anything in your life except apples and fish. You're probably buying 'em of some old woman at twice the market price, to help keep her off the town."

Howdy looked up sharply, suddenly sobered. "How'd you know that?" he demanded.

"I know *you*, old chap," Alec smiled. "Who is it, Mrs. Snyder, up on Bear Mountain?"

Howdy gave a grudging and shamefaced nod, and went quickly over to the stove for more bacon.

"Do you always live as well as this?" Alec asked, changing the subject. "As an omelette maker you're a wonder."

Howdy shrugged his shoulders. "'Pends on how I feel," he answered. "Latterly, sometimes, I'm too—too—well, I guess too damn lazy to get much

supper. I'm not so spry as I used to be. Come nightfall, and I'm sorter tired. Whiskey's easier, and 'bout as cheap."

"I never lectured you, and I'm not going to now," Alec said. "But you know yourself whiskey's not the proper fuel for the human engine. You need three square meals a day, that you don't have to fuss to cook yourself. Why don't you cut out the Thoreau act, Howdy, for a while, and get back a few of the years you've lost on me. Ten years ago you could walk me off my feet. To-day I can leave you by three o'clock in the afternoon—maybe earlier."

"Can you now!" said Howdy, bristling up. Then he slumped again into his chair. "Yes, you can, for a fact," he added. "Howsomever, 'one dieth in his full strength, being wholly at ease and quiet. His breasts are full of milk and his bones are moistened with marrow. And another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with pleasure. They shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them.'"

He lapsed suddenly into gloomy silence, his chin on his breast, and Alec, silent also, watched him.

Then he suddenly raised his head with a laugh. "I'd be a star boarder at Sarah Chandler's, wouldn't I, among those damn pious hypocrites? And she'd

be likely to take me, wouldn't she? Well, well, this ain't washing the dishes!"

He got up, took a bottle from the cupboard, poured himself out a drink, and then began to clear the table. Alec helped him. After the dishes were washed, the two men, with the dog between them, went out in front of the cabin and looked at the evening star hanging in the west above the dim alders and the far line of hills. The world was very still save for a lone song sparrow singing a good-night song and the shrill chorus of the hylas from the swamp, a bell-like chorus which beat in regular waves of sound.

"So you want me to leave my cabin, and be a reformed character?" said Howdy slowly. "You know's well as I do, Alec, that I don't wanter reform. And you oughter know better'n I do that nobody who don't wanter reform can reform. It ain't reform unless you want it. I know what the town goodies think o' me—most of 'em being a lot o' conventions on spindle legs that never dared follow a natural impulse in their lemonade-coloured lives! They think I've disgraced my family name, for one thing. Well, maybe I have, though there's something they don't know. My precious daddy kept more than medicine in his old walnut cabinet. However, that's neither here nor there. I don't have to invoke Darwin to justify my thirst, though

they do say the gin of the father shall be visited on the children."

Howdy laughed dryly at his joke. "I'd like to tell that one to Tom Hall in the bank," he chuckled. "I sure love to put a nice stick of scriptural dynamite under his piety."

Then he grew sober again. "Listen!" he said. "Do you hear those hylas in the swamp? Do you feel the stillness, the hush o' the world? Of course you do—you've got senses. Damn few people have—they only pretend. Well, that's why I came out here and put up this shack. I got this land on a swap for some of my precious inheritance. Nobody bothers me here. The fishing used to be good in Muddy Brook, though it's not any more. There are still showy orchids down there in the swamp. Many an evening like this one I've sat here while the darkness crept over the world, and a fox came sneaking across the clearing, or a deer cracked in the bushes, and I've thought o' what the Psalmist said:

"Thou makest darkness, and it is night;
Wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth;
The young lions roar after their prey
And seek their meat from God."

Maybe it's only a fox after a pheasant in the swamp, but he's seeking his meat from God, at that. Look at Venus up there in the west, like a lamp!

“‘Thou makest the outgoings of the morning and the evening to rejoice.’

No, Alec, you mean well by me, and you’re the only soul on this goodly frame who does, I guess. But it won’t work. I don’t want change. I got a little bit o’ good in life to hang on to—’spite o’ what folks say—and it’s this, whiskey and all.”

He stooped down, stroking his dog’s head, and fell silent.

Alec was silent, too. After all, he thought, what was there he could say? Barring the whiskey, of course, this man was but doing what made Thoreau famous, when you came to think of it. A mute, inglorious Thoreau, with a vast empirical knowledge of beasts and birds and fishes never committed to paper, that perhaps described him. In his heart Alec could not withhold a certain admiration, the admiration every true-born Yankee has for the thorough-going individualist, nor even deny him a quaint charm.

“Well, Howdy, I’m afraid you’re right,” he said presently. “I don’t even blame you, I guess I sympathize with you—except for the rum. That’s bad for the liver, and I want to go fishing with you for many a year yet. I must be on my way now. I’ve got to square myself with Mrs. Plumb, and answer about forty letters.”

"That's what comes of having a housekeeper and a business," answered Howdy scornfully. "If there was a letter for me in the post-office, Joe Smith would throw a fit." He moved toward the door of his shack. "Come in here a minute before you go," he added.

Alec followed him to the hearth, where he stooped down, and with the iron bar which served as a poker pried up a large stone at the outer corner. Below was a hollow, and in it a tin box.

"I want you should remember that, Alec," he said slowly. "It's my will inside. Funny, my making a will, ain't it? But—but—well, there's certain things to be done. You're all I've got to rely on to do 'em."

"Certain things? Of course I'll——"

"I knew you would," said Howdy, letting the stone fall back like an interruption. "Drop in again and we'll have a mess o' trout."

Alec shot a look at him, and turned toward the door without further questioning.

"'Night, Howdy," said he.

"'Night, Alec," the other answered, as he took his Bible from the shelf.

Three days later Howdy did not appear in the Bird House Man's garden; but as that was a way he had, Alec didn't worry. He had earned all he

wanted, evidently, or the temptation to go fishing had become too strong. It was mid-May before Alec Farnum saw him again.

Still on his quest for rare warblers, Alec had wandered one beautiful clear day far afield. He had left home early, with his field glasses and a pocket of lunch, and striking at once up over Bear Mountain had reached the high plateau over the crest, which had been a famous grazing country a century ago, but was now almost uninhabited, crossed only by a single road where the grass grew between the wheel ruts. Much of the land had gone back to forest, and even the scattered clearings were half overgrown with berry vines. This plateau was some ten miles across, the mountain wall dropping down on the other side to the sleepy, forgotten hamlet of Mercer, isolated from all railroads and so far removed from Southmead by the Bear Mountain barrier that it might have been in another world. Even the one road which crossed the plateau did not lead to Mercer, but turned off southward to connect with an ancient turnpike in the far valley near the mill town of North Benton.

Alec had tramped till nearly noon, now through fields and along the forest edge, now in the road, till he had reached the point where the road came nearest to the eastern rim of the plateau, and swung

south. If he kept on to the east, he reflected, he would reach Mercer, and hence another north-and-south valley that might serve as a migration route. Besides, the day was fine and the way unknown to him. It would have the excitement of exploration. He had been to Mercer but four or five times in his life, and then by the long road around the mountain.

He looked about him now for some path or wood road leading east, and presently came on an opening in the roadside bramble hedge which evidently marked an ancient lumber track. He struck down it at once, intent on reaching water somewhere down the slope for his lunch. There was little water on the plateau, so that he had not crossed a brook for the past three or four miles, and he was getting thirsty. The logging road was still passably distinct for a mile or more, until the edge of the plateau was reached. Then it seemed suddenly to lose itself, to die away into the mystery of the forest. Alec, peering about for the best way down through the tangle of rocks and fallen hemlocks which littered the crest of the ridge, suddenly spied a blaze on a tree. He went over to it, and looked on the other side. There, sure enough, was a corresponding blaze for the eye of a man ascending the slope.

“Well, somebody evidently goes somewhere,” he

thought, and plunged down. Several more blazes, some of them fairly fresh, some almost healed by time, took him down through the bad stuff and the rocks by what he realized was about the only practical passage. Below, as the slope grew gentler, the blazes ceased, but by the woodsman's instinct in his feet Alec felt he was on a trail, and knew when he got off it. To the eye it was practically invisible, however, except now and then for a broken branch or the footmark where a piece of rotten wood had been crushed. He walked rapidly, wondering who could use this trail, and why; some hunter, probably, he thought, or trapper, who ascended thus to the wild plateau. Presently he heard the sound of falling water and increased his speed, the sound suddenly augmenting his thirst to a torture. Evidently there was a brook not far ahead.

There was, and a man sitting by it, the noise deadening his ears to the sound of Alec's approach.

"Howdy, Howdy!" Alec cried, when he was almost upon the seated figure.

Howdy started as if some one had struck him, and turned a startled face. But he kept command of his voice.

"Howdy, Alec," he answered, completing their habitual salutation.

"Well, I didn't expect to find you here," Alec

laughed. "I expected to eat my lunch alone. Had yours yet?"

Howdy slapped his hip pocket with a shrug.

"Won't do," the other cried. "Here, have one of my sandwiches. And let me at that water!"

He leaned over and plunged his face in the brook, drinking deep.

"This brook's a new one on me," he said as he rose. "I've never been down this slope of the mountain. Looks as if there might be fish in it. Are there? I'm sure there are, you've kept so almighty quiet about it these thirty years."

But Howdy didn't grin. He looked sober and troubled. Alec, however, appeared too cheerful to notice. "Did you spot that trail coming down?" he asked. "I wonder who blazed it." Then he paused, and looked sharply at Howdy. "You did, you sly fox, you!" he cried. "It leads straight to the best trout pool in the county, I'll bet a hat! Come, you've got to let me see you land one."

Howdy's face expressed relief, which Alec did not fail to note, though he still gave no sign of attention.

"All right," said the fisherman. "Finish your grub first."

Alec passed him a handful of raisins, and they munched in silence. Then Howdy rose and started down the brook bed, with steps a little uncertain.

Once Alec thought he was going to fall. Presently he stopped by a deep brown pool under a boulder, jointed his rod, examined his fly, and with hands that trembled made a perfect cast under the low-hanging hemlock boughs. There was an almost instantaneous strike, and he brought out a ten-inch beauty. He cast again, and brought out another, which followed the first into the pocket of his old leather jacket.

"The old he-grandfather's in there yet—let him stay," said he. "I—I got to be goin' on, Alec."

"You mean home? Maybe it's time I turned back, too—anyhow, I will for the company."

"Yes, you'd better. It's a long pull home for lame walkers," Howdy answered, with a hint of his old dryness. "But I got to be pushin' on the other way."

"You're hiding the best pool from me, eh?" said Alec. "I didn't think you'd do that to me, Howdy." He put as much reproach as he could into his voice.

The other man looked troubled and miserable. "No—no—it ain't that, Alec, honest. I—I wouldn't do that to you. I—I—I just got to be pushin' on."

"Well, I'll push on then, too. I really wanted to get to Mercer. How far is it?"

"Three mile, at the least. You can't make it and get back in time for grub. Think what Mrs. Plumb'll do to you."

"Oh, bother Mrs. Plumb. You can't scare me so easy as that. If you can walk it, I can."

Howdy drew his thin form erect, as if with the sudden stiffening of resolution. "Come on, then," he said, with strange gruffness. "I never meant you should know till I was dead and you opened that tin box. But maybe it's best you should know now. I—I—my God, Alec, it is not good for man to be alone!"

His face was working with emotion, and as he stepped off the rock he seemed about to fall, so that Alec put out a hand and caught his arm. But he shook the hand off almost angrily, and strode back, in the lead, to their starting-point at the falls. There he turned into the dim trail again, swinging down the slope without the slightest hesitancy, and at such a pace that Alec was hard put to keep up. He said never a word.

They broke out of the woods after a mile, into an upland pasture, still silent and in single file, crossed the pasture, broke through a grove of birches at the lower edge, and came down through a second pasture strewn with boulders to an ancient white farmhouse, surrounded by blossoming apple trees, and looking eastward over brown ploughed fields to the distant white spire of the Mercer meeting-house. A thin white road crossed these fields and ended in the

dooryard. This farm was the valley outpost against the invasion of the mountain forest, a pretty, peaceful spot, so picturesque that Alec unconsciously stopped in his tracks to admire it.

But Howdy kept on, and Alec hurried after him.

In the dooryard Howdy also stopped, and gave a low, peculiar whistle, more like a bird song than a tune. A second later the door opened and a strange figure ran out with a little cry of welcome.

"Oh, here's the fish man!" were her words.

But they were spoken in a child's voice—a child's voice grown old. She was a gray-haired woman, but, like a child's, her hair hung in curls on either side of her face, and it was bound with a large pink bow, and under one arm she carried a doll.

Alec shuddered.

She was close to Howdy now, laughing gayly, and feeling for his pockets. To Alec his face was no less terrible than hers, as he brought forth the two trout he had caught and gave them to her, and others besides which evidently had been caught earlier.

"Margy, Margy!" she called, her voice cracking with excitement. "Bring a plate!"

Another woman appeared at the door, with a plate in her hand, nodding to Howdy, and cast a glance of astonishment at Alec.

"You run and put them in the pantry, sister Jane," said she to the child-woman, who obediently trotted off.

"Mr. Farnum, from Southmead, my best friend—Mrs. Compton," said Howdy, the words barely coming from his throat.

Alec took off his hat, looking at the woman as he did so. She was of about his own age, a shade grayer, perhaps, and must once have been handsome. But like many another mountain farm woman she bore the hard marks of her life on her face and figure.

"Where's Joe?" said Howdy.

The woman shrugged her shoulders. "The village, as usual, I s'pose," she answered. "The new man's good, though. Got the ploughin' done early, and all the corn's in the ground and up, and we got the south field down to pertaters."

"Behold, now, Thy servant hath found grace in Thy sight," said Howdy, with a wry smile. "Well, I'm glad, and I'm just as pleased Joe ain't here."

He pulled a greasy, battered old wallet from an inner pocket, while the woman shifted her feet in her embarrassment at Alec's presence, and took from it a number of bills, which Alec could see from where he stood far exceeded any pay he had given to Howdy for garden work. These he gave to the

woman and she hastily slipped them into the bosom of her gown.

"Thanks," she muttered. "You well, Howdy?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "'Boast not thyself of the morrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth,'" he said. "And—and she?"

Again his voice choked.

The woman glanced back into the house. "Just the same," she said, in a low tone. "She'll outlast us all. Grandmother did, you know. Sh! She's coming now."

Howdy turned hastily and began to stride away toward the mountain again, Alec behind him. They heard the strange, old-young voice call: "Fish man, don't go 'way!" and then a sound as of an old, old child crying with disappointment.

Howdy clapped both hands to his ears, and almost ran up the slope. He never stopped his furious pace till they were in the woods again, and then he sank, exhausted and panting, on a log, and buried his face in his hands.

Alec stood above him, a hand on his shoulder.

"Why do you come at all?" he said. "Why don't you send the money?"

Howdy looked up, miserable. "I have to," he answered. "I *have* to see her—and it almost kills me."

"It happened long ago?"

"Thirty-odd years. Scarlet fever, they said. But her grandmother went the same way."

Alec was silent a long moment, his hand moving gently on Howdy's shoulder.

"Was that her home?" he presently asked.

The other nodded. "I came down that brook and found her, thirty-one years ago," he cried out, as if glad at last to speak. "The flowers had appeared on the earth, the time of the singing of birds had come. And oh, thou wert fair, my beloved! I gave her all my trout before we said a word."

He lifted his face, and his eyes looked out past Alec toward the valley below.

"Yes, she lived there," he went on. "She loved that house, that gentle valley. It was going to be our home—ours!"

His eyes fell at the word, and he turned his face away from the valley.

"Then—then *that* happened. I was camping up the brook to be near while she was sick—and one day they—they told me. I thought it was a dream—that we'd wake up. But we never woke. Then her father died, and her sister, that's the one you met, she lived in Connecticut some place—was going to send her away to an asylum! Why, it would have killed her, wouldn't it?"

He looked up at Alec pleadingly, and Alec nodded, not trusting to speech.

"Well," he went on, "Joe Compton's no good, and he couldn't run a farm, but there was nobody else 'cept her sister to keep her there, in the place she loved, where nobody could see her and nobody could make fun of her, and where she could smell the apple blossoms in the spring. Maybe I thought some day, if she kept seeing me, her poor, lost mind would come back—her poor, lost mind! God, Alec, where does a mind go to when it leaves the body like that—leaves the body still young and healthy and active? Where does it go to?"

"I think God has it, keeping it for her—and for you," Alec answered, patting the shoulder below him.

"And that was why you sold your father's house in Southmead?" he asked after a silence.

"There was more'n the house," said Howdy. "It's all in bonds, over to the North Benton Bank. I go fishin' every so often—for coupons. That keeps the farm going in spite of Joe Compton. She—she's never lacked for anything."

"And back home we thought you'd blown it all in for rum!" said Alec, almost to himself.

"Yes, and they're still a-goin' to think so, the Scribes and Pharisees!" Howdy cried, stiffening up.

"By God, Alec, if you ever let 'em think anything else—if you ever let 'em know about *her*, I'll——"

"There, there!" said Alec, tapping him. "You and I are friends, and you've trusted me. Don't you trust me still?"

The man on the log put out his thin, hard hand in silence, and Alec grasped it.

"Alec," he said, "some day I'll go off alone to die, like the beasts of the field. It'll be sooner than anybody thinks, maybe. You know where that tin box is, and you know now what you've got to do for me. If—if I go before the old pup, look after him, too."

"We won't talk of dying just yet," Alec answered. "Where is Spot, by the way?"

"I lock him up when I hit this trail," said Howdy; "it—it's too long for him; he's too old. And sh-she's scared of dogs. Come, you must be starting now. It's a good eighteen mile back."

"We must be starting, you mean," said Alec gently.

Howdy shook his head. "For thirty years I've climbed that trail alone," he answered, a solemn dignity in his face.

Alec paused a moment, irresolute. "Remember, you've got to feed poor Spot," he said.

There was the vaguest dryness in Howdy's tone as

he replied. "I shan't depart that way," he said. "You needn't worry. 'By, Alec."

Alec accepted the inevitable.

"'By, Howdy," he answered.

And he struck up the dim trail through the forest, leaving the bent, brown figure still seated on the log behind.

It was pitch dark when he came into Southmead, and a whip-poor-will was singing mournfully by the bridge.

CHAPTER XII

THE HOMING PIGEON

FEW of us are above a weakness for memorial trinkets of our dead lives, and Alec Farnum was no exception. Neither, to be sure, was he greatly an offender; but at the back of the bottom drawer of his desk was a little tin box, and in that box lay a faded photograph of a girl, a bit of yellowed lace, a glove, and a score or so of letters, tied together. He had not looked upon these relics for years, however. Long, long since, the memory of that first love-passion of his manhood had changed from an aching sense of loss to a soft and wistful recollection almost as of another's life. He could manage a smile as he thought of his relics there in the tin box, but he hardly cared to look at them. Alas! he was past fifty. What had he to do with gloves and notes and tender love tokens? And they reminded him too painfully of his loveless years.

He shut the drawer rather hastily on this day when the box had come again to his view, and leaned forward over his desk, playing idly with a pencil. Alec had never married. When he returned from his

“finishing trip” abroad, after his college days were over, and found that Elsie had gone from Southmead and become another’s wife, his soul had been plunged in the depths. He could still recall the agony of those days. He recalled, too, his fight with himself to regain poise and happiness, and how he had found both in study and service—service to his beloved birds and to his town and neighbours. No, it had been many, many years now since he could call himself an unhappy man—he had to confess that. He had to confess, too, that it had been many, many years since he gave up his first hope that she might some day come back to him. He drew the design of a bird house on a sheet of paper, almost mechanically. Yes, he would have to confess that it had been many years since he had greatly desired Elsie to come back to him!

This last reflection caused the pencil to drop from Alec’s fingers. He was not much given to introspection, in spite of the fact that he lived alone. This reflection had actually come to him, definitely formulated, for the first time, and it surprised him. Why, then, had he lived on alone? Why had he never married?

He picked up the pencil once more and made sprawling marks. There is a bloom, a wonder, an enchantment, radiating from the first-love passion

which can never be recaptured. Women had attracted him since—he realized that. But none had stirred in him this holy intensity, none had come with “the aura of enchantment” in her hair. And now he was nearing fifty-five! Passion could never stir in him again, he thought. He would live for Ruth, for little Miss Millie Tilton, for all his flock of devoted friends and protégés. After all, he was blessed as few men are. He smiled, though it may be a little wistfully, and tossing the pencil aside rose and walked to the veranda overlooking his garden, where the foxgloves were just coming into flower.

Ruth was in the garden, walking with a woman he had never seen before. Doubtless, he thought, it was her friend Mary Todd about whom she had written so much to him the past winter, and whom she had induced to come to Southmead for a vacation. Mary Todd belonged, Alec fancied, to the type of “new woman”—whatever that is. At any rate, she was a member of the Minimum Wage Commission, she wrote pamphlets and articles, she made speeches for equal suffrage. Still, if Ruth admired her so much, Alec was prepared to like her, too. He smiled as this phrasing crossed his mind. “*I am* getting to be an old fogey,” he thought.

Then he whistled to attract Ruth’s attention.

“Oh, hello, you’re not working,” she called. “I

was afraid you would be, so I didn't disturb you. I was showing Miss Todd the garden. Do you mind?"

"Very much," said Alec, coming down the path to meet them.

He shook hands with the stranger, looking into her eyes keenly, eyes that looked back into his with no less frank a curiosity. She was a tall, strong, energetic woman, he judged about forty, though it might be that the decisive lines of character written on her face gave her an added maturity. She had keen gray eyes, not without a twinkle, and a large mouth which parted in a bright smile. Her voice was low pitched, strong, and pleasant.

"I think your garden is charming," she said. "If I said quaint I presume you'd not forgive me."

"I'd rather you said queer," Alec replied. "A garden should be like its owner."

"And are you queer?"

"Ask Ruth," he laughed.

"I'd rather call it dear—sometimes," she answered, leaning on his arm.

"Ruth has told me so much about you that I really feel as if I knew you," said Miss Todd.

"And Ruth has told me so much about you that I'm afraid of you," Alec replied.

"Afraid of *me*? Why, Ruth, what have you said?"

"She's made me think you are an emancipated

female," said Alec, "and I'm always afraid of emancipated females. You never know when they are going to have an attack of old-fashionedness."

Miss Todd laughed, a low, infectious laugh.

"The only kind of a man I'm afraid of is an old-fashioned man," she said. "You never know when they are going to have an attack of intelligence."

The two looked at each other again, their eyes twinkling, and the Bird House Man felt deliciously alert and vital.

"Well, I'm an old-fashioned man—look out for me!" he said, and led the way through the flowery paths of his garden.

His visitor was genuinely interested in flowers and birds; he could tell that by a sixth sense all true gardeners possess. She was particularly enthusiastic in the wild-flower corner, naming several varieties from their leaves.

"You know the wild flowers, don't you?" he said.

"I did once," she answered, with sudden wistfulness. "I was born in the country, in one of those little white houses we used to think all true Americans came from. Oh, it's good to get back into the country!"

"And where do true Americans come from now?" asked Alec.

"East Houston Street and Lithuania," she answered. "At least, that's my professional opinion."

Oh, you have cardinal flowers! When will they blossom?"

"Before you leave us, I hope," said Alec gallantly. "Now, Ruth, you run and get the kettle started while Miss Todd and I pick a bouquet."

He began cutting several of his Siberian irises, while his guest protested.

"It's a shame to cut them," she said.

"Of course it is," said Alec. "It hurts me more than it does them, too. But if it was no sacrifice to cut them, it would be no pleasure to give them. So, you see, I'm selfish after all."

"Ruth has often told me how selfish you are," the woman smiled, as she took the irises from his hands.

"Ruth is a sentimental little goose," answered the Bird House Man crossly.

Miss Todd laughed again, her low, infectious laugh. "But isn't that the kind of old-fashioned woman you like?"

"It used to be; I've been converted to the emancipated female recently," he said.

Miss Todd looked at him quickly, as if she were not quite sure how to take this. Then she smiled. "You still try to flatter like the old-fashioned male," she replied.

Alec laughed, too. He felt altogether foolish and light headed.

"But one has so little success with the new woman! You don't even blush. Yet a blush would immensely become you—immensely."

"Blushes, I fear, are for *débutantes*. I'm a middle-aged woman," she said, rather soberly, though her lips smiled.

"I am an old man," said Alec. "To me, at least, you seem a girl. And yet you seem not a girl. You seem to pull me back to a point where my old blood races like a contemporary. Upon my word, Miss Todd, I want horribly to flirt with you!"

He spoke with comic solemnity, and yet he seemed almost naïvely sincere. The woman dropped her eyes suddenly and turned rosy, making no answer except to quicken her pace toward the house.

Alec walked beside her in silence. He had seen the blush, and he felt with a strange thrill that prickle of guilt which comes to the young when they are doubtful of the impression they have made on a woman. He wanted to take her hand and ask her pardon. He wanted to turn a somersault of delight. He very nearly ended by calling himself an old fool, out loud.

Ruth had the tea ready, and the next hour passed merrily. When his guests had gone Alec went back into his garden and contemplated the cut stalks of his Siberian irises, shaking his head in perplexity.

Nor did his perplexity decrease as his relations with Miss Todd grew more intimate. They talked sometimes for hours of birds and wild flowers, as he led her on tramps through the woods. Again they talked of social problems, she from her standpoint of legislative reform, he from his narrower but more intense groove of individualistic humanitarianism. To Alec, every problem had been a personal one—the redemption of a single soul. He knew the unit, she knew the mass. Their minds struggled to meet, to adjust, to correlate. It was fascinating, thrilling to him, and he was not unaware that she, too, enjoyed their long talks as they tramped along.

But he was equally aware that it was useless to deny her sex attraction for him, or the vague sense she had of its existence, so that there was a defensive wall always between them. At times, when he helped her over a fence, touching her hand, he tingled like a boy again, and released her fingers in haste lest she should guess. It was a mystery to him that this fine vibrant woman should still be single. He longed to question her, but somehow the questions never reached his lips.

Then suddenly, unexpectedly, the memories were released again from that tin box, and Alec's dead life returned to confront him.

It was Miss Millie Tilton who brought him the news.

She was pale and flustered when she entered the garden where, late in the afternoon, he was weeding.

"Alec," she said solemnly, "somebody's come back!"

The man started to his feet. "You—you mean——"

She nodded. "Elsie, yes. She came this noon. She's at Sarah's. She came to see me. She—she's a widow now."

"Is she in trouble?" the man asked quickly.

"I don't think so. She was awfully well dressed. She always did dress well, you remember. She said she came back because she wanted to see her old home. She said her son was married, and her house was lonesome, so she just packed up and came. She—she asked after you, Alec."

"It's been thirty-two years since I saw her!" Alec said, as if to himself. He wiped the back of his earth-stained hand across his forehead. "Why did she come back now?"

Miss Millie stole up close to him and laid her finger tips lightly on his sleeve. "She—she's very pretty still, Alec," said the little woman.

Alec looked down upon his friend and smiled into her big brown eyes.

"Millie," he said, "it's not quite as you think, I'm afraid. You thought that all these lonesome years I'd gone on loving Elsie. I used to think so, too.

But it isn't so. We aren't made that way, after all. If it had been so, I should have stagnated. Instead, I've kept alive. Of course, if she were in trouble I'd help her. But I'm afraid I don't want to see her otherwise."

"Oh, Alec!" Miss Millie gasped. "And I thought you were so fine and strong and had forgiven her!"

"I'm afraid you still don't understand," he answered. "There was never any question of forgiveness. The wind of passion bloweth where it listeth. I never had to *forgive* Elsie for going away. That was her right—and her destiny. But much water has run under bridges since then. I'm not the man I was—she's not the woman. Never mind, Millie—some day I'll try to make it clearer."

"Well, she's staying at Sarah's," said the little woman, moving away and watching him with a puzzled frown as he stooped again and began to pull weeds. She had never before thought that he could be heartless, she told herself.

He had not been weeding long after her departure before he was startled by a step on the sanded path, and looking around quickly saw a woman standing before him, with a dash of lavender on her white dress and a lavender bow beneath her hat brim, which touched with a pale reflection a heightened colour into her cheeks and lay prettily against her gray hair. She

stood in silence looking at him, as if she were pleading for recognition.

Alec sprang to his feet. "Elsie!" he said. "You!"

"Yes, Alec," she answered, her voice almost a whisper. "It's me. I don't know why I've come. I—I was lonely. I—I—I never forgot my girlhood days; women don't, I guess. It seemed as if I just had to see the old scenes again, the old faces. I—I'm old now myself, Alec. Can't you forgive me and shake hands? See, I've put away all my pride and come to you to ask it."

The Bird House Man wiped his soil-crustcd hand as best he could on his corduroy trousers, and took her proffered palm.

"There's no question of forgiveness, Elsie," he answered. "Won't you sit down?"

He was thinking of those lone night watches years ago when his tortured imagination had pictured her return to him, and he had taken her into his arms with a cry and buried her weeping face on his shoulder. Now the touch of her fingers left him cold like the touch of a stranger. She seemed to him, as she said, an old lady. He noticed a certain dumpiness in her walk as he led her to a bench.

"I—I've read your works all these years, Alec," she was saying. "You're quite a famous man, aren't you?"

"Am I?" said he. "That's a bubble I never thought much about. And you? Have you been happy? Your husband is dead, Millie tells me."

The woman inclined her head. "He died two years ago. Must—must we talk of him? I have a son who is married. He lives in Cleveland. I am quite alone in the world now."

"You have money?"

Again she inclined her head. "I have plenty," she answered. "But that—that's cold comfort."

"Cold, perhaps, but somewhat essential, as the world is organized," said Alec. "I'm glad to hear you've been happy, Elsie, indeed I am."

The woman was looking at the long shadows creeping across the garden, lavender shadows from a glowing sunset. The birds were singing, the air was fragrant with perfume.

"Happiness," she said slowly, "is a funny thing. I'm not just sure I know what it is. I thought when I—I went away to live in a city I was going to find it there. Now it seems to me it can only be found in—in—in a place like this, where it's quiet and peaceful and birds sing."

"It's in neither place, Elsie. It's in the human heart," said Alec. "You lived in a city, then?"

"You might have guessed," she answered. "It was because you were going to come back to live here

that I—I—oh, Alec, I was only nineteen, remember!”

There fell a silence between them. Elsie had come back to him! She had come back asking for his friendship, perhaps for his love. And he could find no word to say. It hurt him, too, that he should feel a certain resentment toward her for coming back, for not abiding by the decision she had made and seeing it through. “It’s only silly wounded pride on my part, because she comes back after her husband is dead and her son married,” he told himself. But still the resentment persisted, and he sat uncomfortably beside her, with no word of softness on his lips.

The silence grew painful to both of them, and the woman struggled to speak. “Oh, Alec,” she said, “we are both old people now. Can’t—can’t you really forgive me and make me feel that you are glad to see me back again? I’ve—I’ve lived for this home coming for—for two years now.”

She put one hand to her bosom with a quaint gesture that Alec remembered out of the past, and the sight of it stabbed him. He paused long before he replied.

“No, Elsie,” he finally said slowly. “You are wrong. We are not both old people. You have had your life—your husband, your child. The boy, you say, is married. But I have had no son, no daughter.

I've not had my life. I still feel young, foolishly young no doubt, but young just the same. You've made me realize that just now, since you came. Once I was five years older than you. Now I am ten years younger. We aren't the people we once were, Elsie. We never can be again. I tell you again there's no question of forgiveness. But once you were to me the dearest thing in earth or Heaven—and I couldn't forget that. If you could have returned to me with the aura in your hair!"

"I—I don't understand," she said.

The man smiled faintly. "Neither do I—quite," he answered. "Oh, Elsie, you ought never to have gone away!"

"Don't—don't!" she cried. "I've known that always—always!"

She stared straight ahead, her eyes misty, and the man beside her looked helplessly at his feet. Then she rose.

"I'm going now," she said.

Alec rose also. "I—I don't know what to say——" he began.

She managed a crooked little smile. "Of course not," she answered. "There was only one thing, and you can't say that. I ought never to have come."

He let her go down through the garden, struggling with himself. His conscience told him to call out to

her, to rush and take her hand, to lead her back. Yet, as she walked, with bowed head, a mature figure settling into dumpiness, he saw the tall, erect, lithe figure of Mary Todd, and passion stirred within him. It was not a memory his heart hungered for, but an actuality; not sacrifice, but throbbing life. And passion had its way; he was silent, and let her depart.

When she had gone, he took the tin box and buried it deep behind the garden. But his conscience was not so easily to be laid. All that night he lay awake, wrestling with his problem. He knew well enough what he would have advised another in his situation, and he smiled grimly at the irony of his predicament. He had counceled so long for others' happiness now that he did not know how to seize his own. Sacrifice had become a habit.

"I'm a damned New Englander after all," he muttered in the dark.

Then he heard again the woman's words, "I've known that always—always!" and saw her bowed head as she departed. She had chosen the worser part—she had suffered; and his heart bled for her, she, the girl who had been to him once the Beatrice of his dreams.

And yet—and yet—Love had come to him again, come to him with a strong, mature, tender intensity,

not for a girl to be sure, but for a woman with a mind that stimulated him and a love life still before her. How he loved her! He made no concealment of it to himself any longer. Elsie's coming had shown him too plainly how matters stood. He would ask her for her love in the morning. If it could be his, then he owed a duty to her as well as Elsie, and his path would be easy to choose. If she saw him, however, as the silly old man he probably was, then he would help Elsie to atone for her loneliness, he would do his best to recapture for both of them a little of the savour from the lost years.

Having thus put his problem in the terms of somebody else's happiness rather than his own, he slept at last.

It was late afternoon the next day before Mary Todd could go to walk with him. Some of her work had pursued her into the country. He led the way back into his garden, by a rear gate, before they had gone far, and sat her down amid his flowers.

"Mary," he said suddenly, "you think of me as an old man, don't you?"

"Do I?" she said, glancing up at him out of the corners of her eyes. "Then I must be a very old lady, for you walk me off my feet."

She was, indeed, panting a little, for his pace had been unconsciously rapid.

"Oh, I shall be walking at ninety," he smiled. "I even expect to play tennis at eighty. That's not what I mean."

She grew grave, to meet the gravity of his underlying mood.

"Alec," she said — "I'm going to call you Alec, without the 'uncle,' as an admission of my own maturity—I've never thought a thing about it. Sometimes you've acted to me like a very small boy."

She laughed, her low, delightful laugh, and looked at him with merry eyes.

His pulses raced at that look. "Mary," he said, "I don't know why you've never married. It must be that your standards are too high for human nature's daily food. But I love you, I love you as a lad loves his lass, a young man his wife. I love you all—heart and brain and body. If you should marry me it would be an act of utter folly on your part, but it would make me the happiest creature alive."

The smile left the woman's lips, the merriment left her eyes. She looked into his face soberly and tenderly.

"Alec," she answered, "you are the best man I have ever known." She took one of his hands in both her own, and held it a second to her cheek, while his heart pounded. "I—I have never loved anybody be-

fore. You think that is strange, but it isn't. All my life I've been in the thick of affairs. I haven't lived a woman's life, as women's lives still go for the majority. I don't honestly think I've ever felt the need of love. It's the need of it that makes most of us love, you know. But when I came here, to your lovely old town, to your garden, tired with more years of labour than I like to remember—yes, I'm forty—there were flower smells that came back from my girlhood and smote me, and then you came out of your pretty white house, and—and—I fell in love with you, dear Alec. I've—I've wanted you to love me, not the way you love Ruth."

She touched her lips to his hand, and then turned her face away.

The Bird House Man took her fingers, in turn, reverently.

"You—you will marry me?" he whispered.

She did not answer at once.

"It is hard to say that," she finally replied. "I don't know if I can make you understand. It—it is hard to give up one's own personality and 'take the quiet name of wife.'"

"But I shouldn't dream of that!" Alec cried. "Please don't take my old-fashionedness quite so seriously. I'll give up my birds before you shall give up your minimum wages!"

She smiled, and shook her head. "You don't know much about women after all," she said. "Old-fashioned—new-fashioned—they mean little. Marriage is a surrender. As some woman said, 'There is *us*, but there isn't *me*' any longer. It wouldn't be a true marriage if that weren't so. I've had my *me* so long, I've made her stand up and bear her own burdens so often, I'm wondering how she'll like it—and what unhappiness you would have if she didn't like it."

"I don't think that question need trouble you," said Alec softly.

The sun was sinking now. A hush had crept over the garden. Out of the flower beds, with the first hint of twilight, an odour came stealing, and Mary raised her face and drank it in.

"What is that fragrance?" she exclaimed. "It—it takes me back across the years!"

"*Mathiola Bicornis*—fragrant evening stock," said Alec.

"Of course—of course! Now I remember! Father always brought some plants home to mother from a nursery, on June second. That was their wedding anniversary. It comes out in the evening and it's a homely plant to look at by day. To think I didn't recall it at once! Oh, it's like coming back home to smell it! I wonder why father always brought that

plant? He and mother set them out together. I can see them now, mother with her trowel, father with the little pots. They always laughed when they were doing it, and sometimes they would stand after the plants were in, holding each other's hands."

She was silent for a long moment, and then suddenly she turned to the man beside her, taking his hand again.

"I don't know yet about that independent *me*," she said, "but I think that I—that I—I'd like to have it just *us*!"

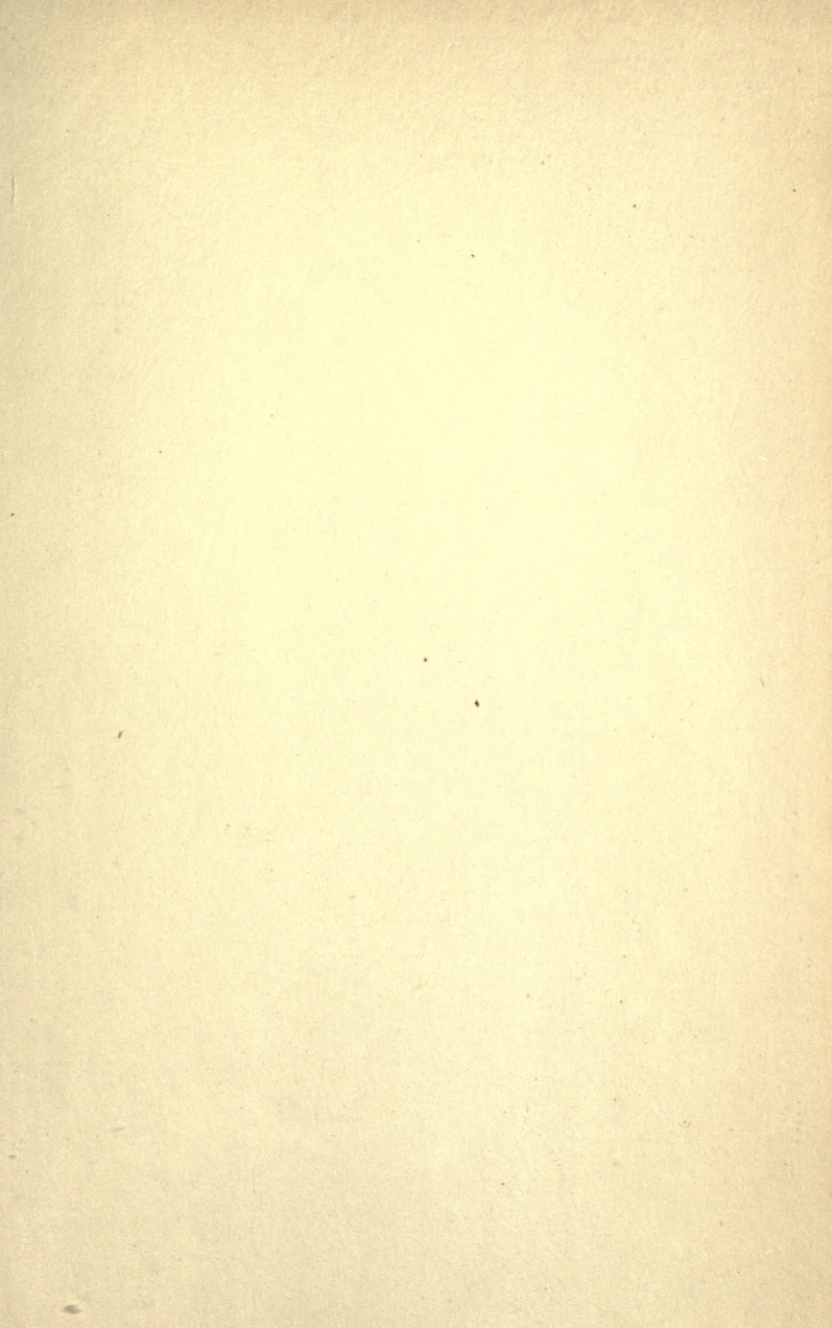
Miss Millie Tilton, coming into the garden to tell Alec that Elsie had gone away again on the afternoon train, but not before Millie had persuaded her to leave her address behind, saw the two figures on the bench and stopped dead in her tracks, overcome with surprise and confusion. Hastily, unseen, she beat a retreat. That evening the poor little spinster spent miserably in her tiny parlour. Alec was going to have a wife! She would have to adjust herself to a whole new set of conditions in the house next door. That bond of memories between her and Alec was broken now, nay, violated. It seemed to her as if some hallowed and precious crystal had been shattered. She mopped her big eyes occasionally with her little lace handkerchief and let her sewing drop to the floor.

But Alec Farnum, beyond the hedge, was aware only of the scent of evening stock, and a warm, strong hand in his, and tender, half-spoken hopes of life to come.

THE END



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